

SOURCE OF INFORMATION: PERCEPTIONS OF TRUSTWORTHINESS AND BEYOND IN EWOM

BY

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines perceptions of information source trustworthiness on social media and the ways in which self-concepts relate to interpretations about trustworthiness of an online information source. The abundance of available information sources in the Internet environment, and specifically on social media, force Internet users to find ways to navigate and choose between multiple information sources and advertisers to create elaborate ways to get noticed by users. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 8 students born in the United States and 8 students born in China at a Midwestern university. Analysis followed a grounded theory approach that consisted of creating codes, gleaming salient themes and developing patterns, which were then validated with external theory.

The study represents a unique attempt to consider a variety of word-of-mouth factors simultaneously that underlie the influence of the source of product information on the information seeker. The findings revealed that individuals do not follow a singular process but use several strategies to evaluate information sources on social media. Building on the literature, five strategies of online information source evaluation are discussed (popularity, source credibility on the subject, opinion multiplicity, likable group influence and unbiased opinion) and a new online information source attribute is presented. Second, individuals' relational self, "derived from ties with specific others" (Kashima & Hardie, 2000), was discovered to influence trustworthiness judgments on social media. These findings are presented to suggest a number of avenues for further credibility theorizing, research, and advertising practice.

*To my mother Olga*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Internet and social media in particular have revolutionized the way people receive, find and exchange information, including product information. Internet users now have access to a wide range of information sources (e.g., news websites, branded websites, consumer opinions), from which they can choose those sources they decide to trust. These changes in information availability have also affected the way advertising works in the online environment. Today, it is insufficient for an advertiser to just place an advertisement somewhere on the Internet and hope that it will be noticed and bring desired results. Advertisers have to utilize media sources that their target audiences choose to trust. As word-of-mouth advertising has commonly been considered the most trustworthy source of information (e.g., Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991; Brown & Reingen 1987), in the era when consumers can choose who they trust, it is not surprising that they turn to non-commercial sources for information about products and services.

However, advertisers are attempting to utilize the power of social media and word-of-mouth by using different trustworthy sources of information to deliver or support an advertising claim. For example, Google introduced Google Shared Endorsements that display recommendations and reviews from a user's social media friends on Google's network ([www.plus.google.com/settings/endorsements](http://www.plus.google.com/settings/endorsements)). In order to understand which sources of word-of-mouth messages are the most effective, it is important to first understand how individuals make judgments about source trustworthiness online.

According to the Pew Internet Project (2014), 74 percent of the online adult audience uses social media sites, with the most involved group of users from 18 to 29 years old. Among available information sources, social media is one of the most popular. In fact,

over 90 percent of college students in the study conducted by Kim, Yoo-Lee and Sin (2014) reported using Wikipedia and Social Networking sites as their primary information sources. The democratized nature of the Internet social environment allows anyone with digital access to be an author; thus, social media is filled with a variety of information sources, which, coupled with a lack of source identification cues, makes it difficult for users to judge the credibility of the source. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how individuals navigate this media environment with an abundance of commercial and non-commercial information sources. How do they understand the source and the information? How can advertisers become trusted sources in online environments?

Furthermore, social media consists of networks of relationships between individuals. People have different values and perceptions regarding relationships with others, which affects how they communicate and therefore distinguish between others offline and online. Fundamental differences between face-to-face and online interactions, e.g., absence of habitual offline cues and abundance of information sources, force online users to create new ways to evaluate communicators on the Internet. Kim, Yoo-Lee and Sin (2014) examined cues that individuals use to evaluate social media as information sources. The authors used social media platforms (e.g., Wikipedia, Social Networking Sites, User Reviews) as distinct sources of information and investigated strategies that users employ to evaluate the quality of information from these sources. That is, this study focused on the cues used to evaluate the quality of the message. The data from online surveys indicated that Internet users use distinct sets of cues to evaluate the quality of information provided by different information sources.

Specifically, Kim et al. (2014) broke down social media into information sources by type of platforms (e.g., Wikipedia, SNSs, blogs etc.). To take the next step, however, the



nature of certain types of information sources within these platforms should be investigated. For example, on Facebook information might come from family members, celebrities, news pages and other sources. As the academic literature indicates, a source of information plays a key role in the information evaluation process on social media. For example, Kang (2010) examined how individuals evaluate blogs for credibility and showed that the source of the blog was the first component evaluated. The question remains, however, how users evaluate *different* information sources on social media and which sources they chose to trust in which situations.

Previously, researchers discussed a number of attributes of a source that influence individuals' judgments about an information source, e.g., credibility, physical attractiveness and likability (e.g., Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Joseph, 1982; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Fazio, 1992). Most of the studies examined these factors in the offline context. Due to the democratization of the Internet and the structure of social media, individuals encounter a wide range of information sources (Pure et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier, the absence of identification cues in the online environment requires a new perspective on source attributes that are applicable specifically to the Internet social environment.

There is little research that examines how individuals deal with the abundance of information sources online and make judgments regarding source trustworthiness. Metzger, Flanagin and Medders (2010) used focus groups to understand how users make judgments about information sources online. The authors found that online users rely on other Internet users as well as use cognitive heuristics, e.g., communicator's reputation or persuasive intent. This thesis takes a step further and examines how individuals make judgments about a variety of specific information sources on social media. Furthermore, Metzger et al. (2010) discussed one attribute of a source – source credibility. The current

study will explore how credibility factors in combination with other attributes define judgments regarding the source. In order to explore a variety of information, we draw from the research on electronic word-of-mouth communication (E-WOM) to consider different information sources. The sources of word-of-mouth communication are used in the study to uncover informants' perceptions about trustworthiness and therefore were not strictly categorized.

Furthermore, a social component of the online media environment implies that both parts of a communication dyad play a role in the communication process. Therefore, distinct characteristics of information receivers might influence how different individuals perceive social connections and relationships to make credibility judgments. The literature suggests that individuals have different dominant self-aspects, i.e., distinct views of 'self' and 'others' (e.g., Triandis, 1989), which impacts their motive, opinions and judgments towards 'self' and 'others' (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Drawing from the literature on multiple self-aspects, relational, individualistic and collective selves are discussed to discern how they might influence individuals' interpretations about an information source.

Thus, two research questions are posed for this thesis:

RQ1: How do individuals make judgments about the trustworthiness of information sources on social media?

RQ2: How do individual characteristics of an information receiver impact trust judgments about an information source?

The abundance of information and information sources available in the online environment, and in particular on social media, forces individuals to pick and choose the sources that they trust. Previously researchers mostly examined sources separately from one another in experiments (e.g., Jin & Phua, 2014). However, in the online environment,

users are bombarded with messages from multiple sources at any given point of time. Therefore, it is important to see how users distinguish between various sources of information and discover patterns of behaviors. In order to fill in this gap in the academic literature, I conducted a series of interviews that involved using a card game method with social media users. The data offer an in-depth view of perceptions towards trustworthiness of information sources. The findings of this research study have important implications for online credibility theory, practice, and research. The research reveals evaluation strategies that individuals use to judge source trustworthiness in social media that will inform both industry and academia about current behaviors of social media users and serve as a foundation to further investigate how individuals navigate in a fathomless depth of available information online.

In the next sections I present the background context of the study, discuss research methodology, data collection and analysis. Then, I introduce the findings and discussion including theoretical and managerial implications. Finally, limitations of the current research study and opportunities for future research are discussed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BACKGROUND CONTEXT**

#### **2.1 Word-of-mouth Communication**

##### **2.1.1 Literature overview**

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has received a vast amount of attention in the past few decades both from academics and practitioners. A number of research studies have indicated that WOM has a considerable influence on customers' behavior and product judgments and is considered to be more influential than traditional advertising (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991; Brown & Reingen 1987). The power of WOM to influence customers explains the heightened interest from marketing and advertising professionals in WOM communication.

The concept of word-of-mouth stems from the theory of personal influence. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) in the classic piece "Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication," demonstrated empirically that interpersonal contacts played a crucial role in the effect that mass media messages had on the audience. The authors show that there is a two-step flow of a message: from the mass media source to specific individuals, called "opinion leaders," and from these individuals further to a wider audience of people that stay in contact with "opinion leaders" in a particular environment. This finding had two major implications for future research in communications. First, it introduced an intermediary between the source of the message and the audience: this person acted as both an information receiver and a source of information for other people. Second, this finding indicated that the message, communicators, and information receivers should all be studied in the context of their specific social network.

By different researchers, WOM has been associated with such terms as personal influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), interpersonal communication (Arndt, 1967), and recommendations (Silverman, 2001). The classic definition of WOM communication was presented by Arndt (1967), who defined the term as “...oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a X communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product, or a service” (p. 3). This definition was later cited by many researchers (e.g. Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013) and influenced definitions presented by other scholars (e.g. Westbrook, 1987; Silverman, 2001).

Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron and Marticotte (2010) conducted a comparison analysis of definitions of WOM proposed by various authors. They found that WOM was most commonly characterized as an informal, noncommercial flow of information between two individuals (p. 6). It is important to notice, however, that the concept of WOM can be presented on two levels: a macro level, which explores information flow across groups of people, and a micro level, which focuses on informational exchange between dyads or small groups (Brown & Reingen, 1987).

Over several decades of research in WOM, various scholars have emphasized that WOM has a strong influence on customers’ attitudes and judgments as well as behaviors (e.g. Brown & Reingen 1987; Bone, 1995; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1998) due to its trustworthiness.

### **2.1.2 From WOM to eWOM**

The development and adoption of informational technologies and the Internet have changed the way that individuals communicate and share their thoughts about various topics including brands and products, by means of electronic word of mouth (eWOM). eWOM can be defined as a message where brands and products are mentioned. For

example, Hennig-Thurau (2004) defines electronic word of mouth (eWOM), as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39). Interestingly, the definition of eWOM includes the category of messages from “potential customers,” which was not presented in definitions of offline WOM. This suggests that eWOM is likely to occur even without any prior experience of a product or service. As can be seen from the definition, eWOM is also different from traditional WOM, as it is directed to multiple individuals (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). “Market messages and meanings do not flow unidirectionally, but rather are exchanged among members of the consumer network ” (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010, p. 73). That is, instead of a dyadic form of WOM communication between two individuals, eWOM represents a form of communication that happens between an individual (a source) and multiple information receivers. The large scale of eWOM and anonymity of information sources can lead to such communication issues as misleading messages (Dellarocas, 2003) and the growing influence of online opinion leaders (Hennig-Thurau, 2004).

Other studies distinguish between the statement itself and the process of subsequent dissemination of information triggered by this message (Jin & Phua, 2014). In such studies an online statement that is made by an Internet user is considered to be consumer-generated advertising (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008) or consumer-generated ads (Campbell et al., 2011), while subsequent social media conversations are considered eWOM.

The online environment shapes the ways people interact with each other and, therefore, presents distinctive characteristics of online communication, such as multi-personal audience, timeless availability, and anonymity (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh &

Gremler, 2004). As emphasized by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), in order to understand WOM and its effects, it is important to consider not only a message, but also the environment (e.g., networks) where WOM communication occurs. Basically, any online network, where people communicate, can be considered to be a possible environment for eWOM to occur. Such online networks have distinctive features, such as unsolicited feedback, scale, control over the published information that is possible via feedback mediators, and “absence of contextual cues that would facilitate interpretation” (Dellarocas, 2003, p. 5). Even though there are differences between online and offline WOM, consumers in the online environment still trust other consumers more than they do advertisers or marketers (Lee & Koo, 2012).

Electronic WOM is often associated with viral marketing. Vilpponen et al. (2006) analyzed the differences between the definitions of viral marketing and compared them with eWOM. The authors conclude that word-of-mouth is a broader category than viral marketing. Electronic WOM is considered to be viral, when “positive network effects prevail and where the role of the influencer is active due to positive network effects” (p.74). This means that the more people talk about a product or service in a particular network, the more value they create to these products and services and the stronger the effect of eWOM in these networks. Therefore, the influence of eWOM depends on the scale of the network. This present study does not explore a particular online network and therefore does not take into consideration network scale and social network effects. The focus is on a message and its source, which might be found in any online social network.

Prior research on eWOM has mostly focused on studying the effectiveness of reviews and ratings on e-commerce websites (e.g., Awad & Ragowsky, 2008). The interest in these types of WOM is not surprising, as reviews and ratings represent customers’

conversations that are directly related to brands, products and services. These conversations are reported to be trusted by 68 percent of online users (Nielsen research, 2013), which is a 7 percent increase since 2007. However, online platforms that offer users a way to comment, review and rate products and services are not the only venues where customers share their opinions about the products. *Social media* is another communication channel that people use to share their thoughts about various topics, including products and services. Spence, Lachlan, Westerman and Spates (2013) define social media as “a term that describes a variety of channels that are designed for the collaborative creation and dissemination of content”(p. 4). More specifically, social media is built on the “ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0” that allows users to create and exchange user generated content, including eWOM, and consists of blogs, social network sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), content communities (e.g., YouTube), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft, Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61-62).

Social network sites (SNSs) are one of the most popular forms of social media that “allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others” (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007, p. 1143). SNSs may be focused on specific relations and interests (e.g., LinkedIn is professional), or have a general focus (e.g. Twitter, Facebook), which means that in these networks users interact with a diverse audience of people (e.g., friends, colleagues) and can find content on very different topics including brands, products and services.

About 70 percent of online users trust customers’ opinions online. However, this form of WOM is third in the rating of the most trusted “forms of advertising” (Nielsen Research, 2013). According to Nielsen Research, 84 percent of customers trust



“recommendations from friends and family,” which makes this form of advertising the most trusted. Social networking sites offer users a platform to communicate with various groups of people including friends and family. Advertisers are always looking for new ways to get customers’ attention. They find ways to leverage the benefits of social media and WOM communication. For example, Amazon used its customers’ actual tweets about the Amazon Prime program and posted them on the main page of the Amazon website to promote the program in August 2014.

Further, the number of active users on SNS offers an enormous audience for eWOM. There are 284 million (Twitter usage) and 1,317 billion monthly active users on Twitter and Facebook (2014), respectively, at least half of which constantly engage in brand-related activities, such as sharing or mentioning brands in posts (BurstMedia, 2013). Taking into consideration the scale of opportunity, it is important to know which types of eWOM will be more and less effective and what are the factors that influence its effectiveness.

### **2.1.3 Product category and its influence on WOM**

The research has focused on discussing the influence of WOM on customers’ judgments about groups of products (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) as well as categories of brands and products (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). In the study conducted by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) word-of-mouth was the most important information source of influence in the purchase of household goods. Some research studies found that the category of product discussed may affect how influential WOM communication about this product will appear for an information receiver. For example, Bearden and Etzel (1982) found differences in the influence that the reference group had on customers’ product and brand judgments of publicly and privately consumed products, luxuries and necessities. The results of their

study showed that the influence is stronger for luxury products and brands that are used in public.

Nielsen research (2014) and SapientNitro (2014) show that customers rely on one or another information source depending on the price of the item. Purchase intentions for expensive items (>\$1000) are most strongly influenced by expert opinions and less affected by branded content or user reviews. Purchase intentions for low-priced items (\$50-399) are more effectively influenced by branded content than by expert and user reviews.

#### **2.1.4 Source of WOM**

Research on WOM has been focusing on the analysis of characteristics of the communicators and sources of information, effects of these characteristics on WOM and the reasons why certain sources of information are more likely to exert influence than others.

Bearden and Etzel (1991) discuss the influence of the reference group on the product and brand judgments. A reference group is defined as any person or group of people that significantly influences an individual's behavior, aspirations and evaluations (Park and Lessig, 1977; Bearden & Etzel, 1991).

Park and Lessig (1977) discuss three motivational forces of reference group influence: informational, value-expressive and utilitarian. *Informational influence* happens when an individual is purposefully searching for the information or observes the behavior of others. The key characteristic of the influencer that distinguishes it from any other information source is that this source is perceived as credible. Normative influence depends on the desire of an individual to comply with a group in the attempt to seek a reward or avoid the punishment. A *value-expressive influence* stems from the desire of an individual to resemble a reference group or because of his or her liking of the group (Deutsch & Harold,

1955; Park & Lessig, 1977). The foundation of *utilitarian group influence* is a desire to comply with expectations of specific individuals or group of individuals. The occurrence of these motivational forces has two implications. First, “seeking information, complying with the preference of others, and adopting values of others all involve some form of communication or observation of decisions, opinions, or behavior” (Bearden & Etzel, 1991, p. 184), which means that the influence takes place in sort of a social environment. Second, the fact that the influence of the reference group depends on individuals’ motivations points to the conclusion that the influence of the reference group is always subjectively assessed by the individual, which means that such factors as prior experience, attitudes towards relationship and other individual characteristics influence how these individuals relate to the information sourced. There is no single correct effective strategy to influence individuals.

Some researchers have focused on both parts of the communication dyad and identified three major factors that influence WOM communication between them: tie strength (e.g., Granovetter, 1973; Brown & Reingen, 1987), similarity or homophily (e.g., Brown & Reingen, 1987; Gilly & Graham, 1998), and source expertise (e.g., Gilly & Graham, 1998). Each of these will be discussed in more detail next.

#### **2.1.4.1 Tie strength**

Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) suggest that “all WOM communication takes place within a social relationship that may be categorized according to the closeness of the relationship between information seeker and the source, represented by the construct tie strength” (p. 4). The closeness of relationships with a source of information shapes attitudes toward an incoming message from this source. Tie strength is a construct that is identified by “closeness, intimacy, support, and association” between people (Brown et al, 2007, p. 4).

Stronger ties mean more frequent interactions with more exchanged information. The perceived strength of ties also affects the influence that the information from a particular source has on the receiver. While strong ties are associated with stronger influence of the information source on the individual, weak ties facilitate flow of information across groups and strong ties (Granovetter, 1973; Brown & Reingen, 1987). Brown and Reingen (1987) found weak ties serve as bridges between various groups of people, which allowed information to travel from one distinct subgroup composed of referral actors to another in the broader social system” (p. 360). The authors mention that weak ties are specifically effective in facilitating diffusion of fashion or other innovations.

Social networking sites offer individuals the opportunity to interact with both “weak ties” and “strong ties” and support the development of both. The Internet, and SNSs in particular, help to maintain the relationships with close friends and family (strong ties) as well as maintain and create relationships with old and new acquaintances (weak ties, Penard & Poussing, 2010).

Previous research on the topic of source trustworthiness on SNSs draws on social capital theory, which refers to the sum of resources created through people’s social relations (Coleman 1988). Coleman emphasizes that social capital is inseparable from social relationships between individuals and groups of individuals. One of the examples of social capital is trust and trustworthiness created by relationships between individuals (Coleman, 1988). Phua and Jin (2011) notice that the Internet facilitates production and accumulation of social capital, as it makes it easier for people to connect and stay connected with a wide audience of people.

Researchers tend to classify family and friends into the category of strong ties (e.g., Penard & Poussing, 2010) and loose social connections into the weak-ties category of social

connections (Jin & Phua, 2014). SNSs, such as Twitter and Facebook, allow users to easily accumulate “weak ties” by providing an access to recourses that are otherwise unavailable, e.g., celebrities that have an account on social media (Jin & Phua, 2014). Therefore, the Internet allows users to communicate with a wide variety of people and brands.

Vilpponen, Winter and Sundqvist (2006) show that in the online environment all connections are equal in their effectiveness and persuasiveness. If this is the case, the question is, how do users distinguish between the information sources online. This issue is addressed in the current study by exploring the cues that online users utilize to make judgments about the trustworthiness of the information source.

#### **2.1.4.2. Homophily**

Homophily of the group relates to the similarity between the group members. It is often described by the old saying that “birds of a feather flock together.” According to Rogers (1983), communities vary on degrees of similarity or diversity of their members. Gilly and Graham (1998) distinguished between demographic and perceptual similarity between an information source and seeker. Demographic homophily relates to group similarity in terms of age, gender and education, while perceptual homophily reflects similarity of shared values and experiences in the group. Gilly and Graham (1998) found that both types of homophily affect the influence of WOM communication, “but in different ways, and their effect varies depending on the product category” (Gilly & Graham, 1998, p. 94). Perceptual homophily greatly enhances the influence of WOM for various product categories, while demographic homophily has strong influence on WOM for consumer durables.

Homophilous communities are more private and closed and thus hinder dissemination of information and usually correspond to strong ties, while heterophilous communities, on the contrary, facilitate the flow of information between diverse audiences (Rogers, 1983).

Previous authors focused on offline communities, where people could judge each other by nonverbal cues and take into account contextual cues, which are not present in the online environment. Brown et al. (2007) suggest that in the online context these cues are “filtered-out”; homophily is based not on common personal characteristics (gender, education, etc.), but on shared interests and mind-sets.

#### **2.1.4.3 Source credibility**

Credibility of the information source has been associated with different terms, such as “trustworthiness,” “believability,” and “expertise.” Some researchers offer a loose definition of credibility. For example, Ohanian (1990) defines credibility as “a communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (p. 41). Other researchers distinguish between factors that form credibility. According to Birnbaum and Stegner (1979), source credibility is composed of three constructs: a judge, source expertise and source bias. On SNSs, the judge is the users who perform an overall evaluation or judgment about credibility of the information source based on some evidence. Source expertise depends on the training, experience and ability. Source bias is defined as the difference between the reported information and the true state of nature. Therefore, the credible source of information is the one that is and perceived to be unbiased and experienced. McCroskey and Teven (1999) conducted an overview of previous research on credibility and boiled it down to two factors that define credibility: trustworthiness and competence. Here, trustworthiness is defined with such terms as “safety” and “honesty,” which correspond to the unbiased attitude. Competence is associated with “qualifications,” “intelligence” and “expertness,” which correspond to the notion of source expertise in the previous definition. The authors also introduced a third factor – “goodwill.” This term stands for the perceived communicator’s caring and empathic attitudes towards a receiver.

Researchers express diverse opinions about the influence potential and trustworthiness of tie strength, homophily and credibility as WOM-forming factors.

Some researchers suggest that familiar and homophilous sources of information are more effective than expert sources. For example, Feldman and Spencer (1965) found that people are more likely to turn to their friends, family members and neighbors for advice rather than to individuals with expertise. Nielsen research (2013) also found that the most trusted sources of advertising messages were “recommendations from people I know,” which corresponded to strong ties and homophilous relationships among group members. Other researchers suggest the opposite. For example, Rogers (1983) proposes that in some cases individuals turn to the source of information that is not similar to them, for example when this source possesses some expertise.

The current study investigates how customers distinguish between trustworthiness of various information sources in the online environment. The research explores the cues that customers use to distinguish between the sources and make judgments about their trustworthiness.

## **2.2 Source Trustworthiness in the Online Environment**

As discussed earlier, the factors that affect perceptions of information sources are tie strength, credibility and similarity. However, as Vilpponen (2006) found, these factors do not work online in the same way that they work in real life communications. These differences in online and offline communication arise due to the unique characteristics of the online environment that affect differences in perceptions of an information source’s trustworthiness.

In order to discuss online trust more in-depth, it is necessary to define trust and trustworthiness. Previous researchers used such terms as “credibility,” “trustworthiness,”

and “reputation” (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Delarocas, 2002; Jin & Phua, 2014) to discuss the influential potential of information sources. As mentioned earlier, some researchers distinguish between these terms. For example, McCroskey and Teven, Hovland, Jenis and Kelley (1953) suggest that credibility is a general term that refers to the perceived communicator’s trustworthiness and expertise. However, trust is not always related to the expertise of the source. Nielsen research uses the term “trust” to identify effectiveness of different forms of advertising that includes “Recommendations from people I know”, “Branded websites”, “Consumer opinions online” and others (2013). These forms of advertising might correspond not only to “expertise”, but also to other factors of WOM, such as tie strength and homophily. Therefore, trust can be used as a broad term, which is not specifically tied to expertise and credibility, and refers to “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable” (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712).

Dellarocas (2003) suggests that eWOM and trust are not inherent in every social network, but they are being purposefully developed by reputation mechanisms embedded in the network system. The author discusses reputation mechanisms that exist in online marketplaces, such as eBay. Dellarocas shows that reputation and trust in online networks is built by individuals, who participate in the network, when buyers and sellers leave feedback on each other. The scale of online networks is the foundation for reputation mechanisms to prosper (Dellarocas, 2003). In fact, the bigger the network the more effective eWOM is in that network, as more players (e.g., sellers and buyers on eBay) contribute to the reputation and trustworthiness of participants, who are complete strangers to each other.

Social networking websites represent a different category of networks, where users communicate with different types of both familiar and unfamiliar people. Furthermore, another distinction of social networking sites is lack of similar reputation mechanisms that



exist in online marketplaces, such as algorithms that rate the trustworthiness of information sources, which makes it important to understand how users understand trustworthiness of social media information sources without such information filters. Therefore, social media users use some other cues to distinguish between more and less trustworthy sources of information.

The concept of trust online is extensively studied in the domain of e-commerce (e.g., Dellarocas, 2003; Wang & Emurian; 2005, Chen & Barnes, 2007). However, there is scant research available on the trustworthiness of information sources in social media. In social media, and on SNSs in particular, users communicate with various sources of information that talk about products and brands. Some of the sources are found to be more trusted than others (e.g., WOM vs. brand's ads, Nielsen, 2013). However, little is known about how customers distinguish between trustworthiness of particular sources of WOM communication: friends, family members, experts, etc. Spence, Lachlan, Westerman and Spates (2013) explored how race of the information source and race of the user influence how social media users make credibility judgments about sources of health-related information from social networking sites. Westerman and Spates (2012) found that the perceived credibility of an information source increases both with number of followers and followers on Twitter. Jin and Phua (2014) found the same pattern, when they investigated perceived trustworthiness of celebrities' tweets. The authors also found that these perceptions of trust influenced product involvement, buying intention and intention to further talk about the product. The effect that trust has on shopping intentions may also depend on gender (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008). Women's intentions to shop online are influenced by trust stronger than are men's intentions.

However, a number of friends and followers on social media might not be an only cue that defines perceived trust in a communicator. Therefore, this study is a timely attempt to explore how customers trust various sources of information in social media and what makes these sources more or less credible and trustworthy across the networks. Also, this study attempts to explore general perceptions of the information source, without emphasizing in which social network the message was found.

WOM communication depends on both ends of the communication dyad. Therefore, the effectiveness of WOM is influenced both by the source of information and the information seeker. There is not much research that examines both dyads of communication. Gilly et al. (1998) explored how WOM is affected by the characteristics of the information source, such as perceived similarity and expertise, and the characteristics of the information seeker, such as the seeker's expertise. The authors discovered that perceived expertise of an information source is strongly associated with its influence on information seeker's opinion and purchase decisions.

This study explores not only a variety of information sources, but also the characteristics of the information receiver that might influence the effectiveness of WOM communication between these dyads as well as the influence of the perceived others in the network that are not involved directly in the communication message. As mentioned previously, the effect of the reference group on individuals' judgments and behavior is subjective and depends on the individual evaluations of the source according to a number of factors.

Survey-based research studies (e.g., Nielsen, 2013) attempt to determine *which* information sources individuals trust. The current study takes a step back and explores *why* individuals trust or distrust specific information sources. In order to go beyond generating a

list of criteria that users apply to evaluate sources and reveal patterns of evaluation processes among individuals, this study takes a qualitative research approach. This research methodology allows the voice of the users to be heard and therefore helps to uncover a wide range of perceptions of trust in their interaction.

### **2.3 Relational, Individual and Collective Self-aspects**

In order to understand how individuals perceive different sources of information, it is essential to illustrate how individuals perceive themselves compared to others. The concept of self reveals itself in the extent to which individuals see their own identity in relation to other individuals and social groups, which varies across cultures (Triandis, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that individuals from Eastern and Western cultures will have different perceptions of relationships between concepts of 'self' and 'others', which corresponds to their self-concepts: interdependent self (Eastern cultures) and independent self (Western cultures). For the interdependent self, "others are included within the boundaries of the self because relations with others in specific contexts are the defining features of the self" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 245), while according to the independent view of self, "at any given moment, the self is assumed to be a complete" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 245). Furthermore, the authors suggest that perceptions of self "can have a systematic influence on various aspects of cognition, emotion, and motivation" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 225). For example, a belief in one's uniqueness is a means to reveal an independent self, which results in the general perceptions of oneself to be above average. Many studies demonstrate that citizens of Western cultures (independent) consistently rate themselves above average on various traits (e.g., Lee et. al., 1995; Lee, 2012), which is not the case with regards to East Asians.

Markus and Kitayama examined self-construals that are predominant in individuals

from different cultures. This is one of the prevailing views in psychology and is also associated with the individualist and collectivist cultural dimension (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hofstede, 1980). Individualism-Collectivism is the most widely studied cultural dimension in consumer behavior (He et al., 2012; Soares et al., 2007). Whereas Collectivism has been defined as societies where "people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups" (Hofstede, 1991) and demonstrate an interdependent self (Triandis, Brislin & Hui, 1988), individualism refers to societies where "ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after him or herself" (Hofstede, 1991). In individualist societies, people are socialized to show an independent self.

Thus, members of these two types of cultures are thought to differ in their values and social behavior, which influences what is preferable and therefore practiced (Hsu & Barker, 2013). However, other authors (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Bodenhausen, 2010, Brewer & Chen, 2007; Cross & Markus, 1999; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Kashima & Hardie, 2000) focused on the diversity of identities that co-exist within an individual with the one that dominates over the others. The dominant self-aspect is the one that is shared with a particular group of people (Brewer, 1991). Brewer and Chen (2007) analyzed existing literature on collectivism and individualism and summarized the current view on the topic: "...people in all cultures have three levels of social orientation—individual, relational, and collective levels of the self. What differs among people across cultures is the salience and priority of these three different selves" (p. 137). Thus, individuals from the same culture could have a distinct dominant level of self. Kashima and Hardie (2000) provided evidence that a tripartite model of self-representation is more accurate than a two-part model (i.e., individual, collective). The individual level of self "comprises aspects of the self-concept that differentiate the person from others as a unique individual with traits and characteristics

that distinguish the person within his or her social context. The relational self reflects a person's significant interpersonal relationships, or close social ties. The collective self is a representation of one's group memberships or group identities" (Tanti, Stukas & Halloran, 2008, p. 361).

Individuals within similar cultures might possess distinct dominant selves; however, the culture affects the characteristics of group cognition and the subsequent level of trust to members and non-members of these groups (Yuki, Maddux, Brewer & Takemura, 2005). Yuki et al. (2005) distinguished between group collectivists (Americans) and relational collectivists (East Asians) and found that Americans "tend to trust people primarily based on whether they shared category memberships" (in-group membership), while "trust for Japanese was expected to be based on the likelihood of sharing direct or indirect interpersonal links" (p. 48). In sum, there is some reason to believe, based on this body of literature, that people with different dominant selves (i.e., individual, relational, collective) may experience trust and social relations differently. Further, it is likely that different dominant selves may hail from different cultures (e.g., Western or Eastern; see Yuki et al., 2005). Therefore, in this study, informants are recruited from country origins from the West (U.S.) and East (China).

In sum, a dominant self-aspect is predicted to have impact on individuals' judgments about information source. Therefore, this study aims at observing not only characteristics of the source evaluated, but also on characteristics of an information seeker that might affect the evaluation process.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Methodological Overview**

##### **3.1.1 Qualitative methodology**

The goal of the study was to enrich existing theory with informants' perceptions regarding message source trustworthiness as well as discover patterns that unite these perceptions. This became possible by taking a constructivist perspective on accumulating knowledge, which also serves as a basis for qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). To take a constructivist perspective means to discover "the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern" (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). Therefore, the choice of qualitative methods was determined by the goals of the study.

The researcher of this study is an Advertising graduate student, who is specifically interested in the interrelation of social psychology and user experience research. Thus, the relevant background and interests allowed the researcher a unique perspective to code the data.

The author took a grounded theory approach to the analysis of data to discover and enrich existing theory. According to Corbin and Strauss (1994), grounded theory "is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (p.273). That is, interpretation of the data as well as the themes that emerged from that data were systematically verified throughout the course of the analysis by referring to existing literature. A grounded theory approach allowed the researchers to generate findings that were emerging from the data and build on theoretical concepts.

There was a 'constant comparative' process within and across informants' discussions and

the existing literature. For data interpretation and description, the researcher used concepts and “plausible relationships” that exist among concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 276). Grounded theory is an appropriate approach to analyze the data because it specifically meets the goals of the study: discover patterns of attitudes and behaviors.

### **3.1.2 Semi-structured interview method**

An individual semi-structured interview was used to collect the data for the study. Interviews are extensively used in qualitative research as a method to gain understanding of meanings that individuals attach to certain events. “Qualitative interviews are conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.4). The current study aimed at understanding different patterns of perceptions about source trustworthiness and thus required an in-depth understanding of individual perceptions. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen because of its flexibility that allows for in-depth investigation of meanings (Bryman, 2012).

### **3.1.3 Card game method**

Interviewing is used in the study in combination with note cards. Cards are used in the study as visual cues to facilitate the evaluation process of various sources of information. The way that cards are used in this study is consistent with the card game method discussed by Rowley, Jones, Vassiliou and Hanna (2012). The authors suggest that the method is particularly effective to use with semi-structured interviews and “can be applied variously to elicit and explore definitions, priorities, processes, challenges, issues, difficulties, views on the future and critical success factors” (Rowley et al., 2012, p. 106). Furthermore, cards are an effective means to shift the focus from the interviewer to the task, which is especially helpful for a novice interviewer (Rowley et al., 2012).

### **3.1.4 Information sources and messages**

Fourteen information sources were presented to informants on cards. The sources represent different types of eWOM communicators and can be divided into three groups according to three major factors that influence WOM. The first factor is relationship ties (e.g., a family member, a best friend). Granovetter (1983) distinguishes between strong and weak ties: "...acquaintances or friends of friends were classified as weak, whereas friends, relatives or neighbors were considered strong ties" (p. 207). The second factor is homophily, "the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status, and the like" (Rogers, 1983, p. 275; e.g., a person from the same demographic and/or interest group) and source credibility (e.g., an industry expert). In order to see how individuals distinguish between in-group and out-group members as well as how they perceive social ties, additional cards were added that distinguished between these categories. For example, to assess the perceived value of social friendship ties, an industry expert source was presented on two cards: 'industry expert' and 'industry expert followed by your friend on social media'. The third factor deals with a source expertise, "the perceived competence of the source providing the information" (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007, p. 6) and is represented in the study, for example, by industry experts.

The information sources were presented on note cards together with a message that informants might come across on social media. The message was telling about a mobile service ('Google Wallet' or 'Apple Pay'). The message was chosen from actual social media messages about these services. Google Wallet' and 'Apple Pay' were chosen for the study, as services for products that were relevant to the participants. It was decided that those informants that used an Android-based mobile operation system would receive cards with



messages about Google Wallet and those who own an Apple operation system would see messages about Apple Pay. See Appendix C for note cards.

### **3.2 Informants**

Informants were recruited from undergraduates at a major Midwestern university of the United States. There was no monetary compensation, but students were offered course credit for participation. A total of 16 undergraduates participated in study sessions (8 males, 8 females, American citizens, Chinese citizens).

In total, there were 16 informants recruited for the study. The study takes a phenomenological approach to explore trust in and attitudes towards eWOM and focuses on “describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 76). Polkinghorne (1989) recommended to sample five to 25 participants for such a study. Therefore, 16 participants is a sufficient sample size for a current study.

Eight informants were students born in the US and 8 participants were students born in the Republic of China and had recently moved to the U.S. Chinese and American cultures have been extensively used in academic research studies as representatives of distinct value systems (e.g. Chen & West, 2007; Aaker & Schmitt, 2001). Students from two distinct cultures were supposed to have different perceptions and values of relationships and group: “...people in Western cultures tend to emphasize the categorical distinctions between ingroups and outgroups, East Asians may have a stronger tendency to think about groups as predominantly relationship-based” (Yuki et al., 2005, p. 48). It was also expected that the dominant “self” may vary in individuals between these two cultures (e.g., individual, relational and collective selves; Kashima et al., 1995; Kashima & Hardie, 2000). See Appendix A for informant profiles.

### **3.3 Procedure**

Each informant was invited into a library's group meeting room to take part in a one-on-one interview. Before the beginning of each session, each informant signed a consent form. Each session started with a semi-structured interview. All interviews were conducted in English. Following a session guide, the interviewer asked a series of questions on the ways that informants use social media for communication and other purposes and their source trustworthiness process (See Appendix B). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview approach allowed the interviewer to ask additional questions in response to what was perceived to be interesting in informants' comments.

After the initial questions, informants considered how different sources of eWOM in social networks might be more or less trustworthy depending on the type of the information source. Participants were given a sheet of paper with the scenario and read it aloud (see Appendix B). Then, participants were provided with 14 cards that contained messages from different sources. Informants were asked to distribute cards into five categories depending on the extent to which they trusted the source of information on each card. The categories included five levels of trust from distrust completely to trust completely. During the task, informants were asked to think aloud and explain their decision making process. As in the study conducted by Kim, Yoo-Lee and Sin (2011), trustworthiness was used in this research as a criterion to evaluate online information sources.

At the end of the session, informants were asked to fill in a questionnaire (10 questions) to reveal their dominant self-aspect on a Relational, Individual, Collective (RIC) scale (Kashima & Hardie, 2000) – See Appendix D. The RIC scale developed by Kashima and Hardie (2000) is a means of identifying a dominant self aspect recognized and used by researchers in academia (e.g., Brewer & Chen, 2007). The interviews were audio-recorded

and results of a card game task were photographed. The entire session lasted no longer than 40 minutes.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The analysis was based on a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The goal of the analysis was to further develop and build upon existing theory with respect to source trustworthiness. First, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. This resulted in 96 pages of data. The analysis began with coding the data, which was executed on 3 levels: open coding, when labels or ‘codes’ were created for each answer; axial coding, when relationships were identified across the open codes; and selective coding, when salient themes were identified and transcripts were read again to identify codes related to the themes (Gallicano, 2013). Appendix E includes examples of coding procedures. As seen in the first example of coding procedure (see Appendix E), open codes were initially assigned to the quotes, then common salient codes were identified. The quotes were then revisited again to re-define common codes, so that they represent common salient themes. Two themes were salient: “biased opinion reduces trustworthiness” and “positive effects of company’s credibility”. The latter theme was the most salient. In order to proceed to the next step, the researcher looked into the literature to interpret the meaning of the salient theme. Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell (2000) were found to discuss the positive effect of corporate credibility on individuals’ attitudes towards the message. Therefore, “positive effect of company’s credibility” was labeled as “effect of corporate credibility on perceived trustworthiness on social media”. This example illustrates the grounded theory data analysis procedure, which means going back and forth between the data and the literature in order to interpret the data with existing concepts and then enrich the literature with new meanings of the concept. The meaning of corporate

credibility emerged from this piece of data: the meaning of effects of corporate credibility was extended to trustworthiness judgments in the online environment.

The coding was performed by one researcher and was based on the informants' replies that formed an understanding and themes that emerged. These themes were then interpreted using existing theory. This analysis allowed the researcher to produce conceptually dense findings from the data that reveal relationships between the concepts and therefore enrich our understanding of how source trustworthiness operates in online environments. All eight criteria of qualitative research were achieved (Tracy, 2010). That is, the topic of the study is timely, interesting and relevant both to industry and academia. In this study, the researcher used sufficient and complex theoretical constructs, methods and procedures that fitted the study goals. Also, the researcher sampled and executed rigorous data collection and analysis processes and was transparent about the methods and challenges of the study. Member checks of key findings were performed by asking two informants to review the findings and ascertain if they appeared to be truthful. Finally, the research study makes theoretical and practical contributions and is presented in an evocative and transparent way (Tracy, 2010).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This research aimed at exploring individuals' interpretations of trustworthiness of various information sources on social media. Three main themes emerged from the interviews. First, unlike past research (e.g., Kang, 2010) the message source was not always an important factor in message scrutiny. That is, a message source was important in some cases, while it appeared to be marginally or not at all important in other cases. Secondly, although most informants indicated that they used multiple strategies, the research revealed five salient strategies that individuals use to evaluate the trustworthiness of a message source. Finally, several characteristics of how relationalists and individualists approach trustworthiness were revealed during the analysis. Each of the themes will be further discussed in detail.

#### **4.1 When Does a Source Matter?**

It was apparent from the informants that the source of the message does not always matter. That is, unlike communication theory and models, the source was not always the primary factor when evaluating a message. For example, Craig (1999) discusses a classic transmission model of communication, which emphasizes the importance of the information source as a key factor for communication to begin as well as specific qualities of a source (expertise). However, what emerged from these data was that trust in the message source is not always scrutinized. Informants were able to clearly articulate when they paid attention to the source of messages.

The source of information for social media advertisements, e.g., 'suggested posts on Facebook', advertisements on the side of the page, is less important than the content of an advertising message. The content is more important in this media context to grab users'

attention. Typologies are often an emergent outcome of qualitative research (Otnes & Fischer, 2005). My research shows that there are two main types of social media users:

1) Individuals who deliberately do not pay attention to advertising. These users divide social media messages into those that come from their social media friends and those that come from other sources. For example, Ping says:

Maybe I just don't notice them [advertisements], as I am just checking what my friends or favorite club are posting. I don't care about other things. I think there is also advertising, somewhere between postings. I don't notice and remember them. On Wechat I will check all the posts because they are from my friends, but on Facebook there are so many messages not from my friends, like advertisements. So I check only what my friends are posting.[Ping]

Yi also tries not to pay attention to advertisements, because she distrusts them:

I distrust them [advertisements/promotions]...There are advertisements on the side of the website...I don't look at them. [Yi]

This finding shows that particular individuals focus attention on non-advertising content on social media, which is consistent with a salient issue of advertising avoidance by individuals. Advertising avoidance refers to “actions by media users that differentially reduce their exposure to ad content” (Speck & Elliot, 1997, p.61). Presumably, using particular cues, individuals identify advertising messages and filter them out. Websites, especially those whose source of revenue are mostly ads (e.g., Google, Yahoo, Facebook), blur visual cues (e.g., background color), so that users are more likely to pay attention to the ads (Walsh, 2014). This research infers that users might utilize some more elaborate cues to distinguish advertising content, which should be further examined in future research.

2) Individuals who pay attention to suggested posts and advertisements because they like the content of the message. For example, Madelyn says:

A lot of suggested articles pop up on my feed and if the title is interesting I will click on it. I will not even pay attention what the

website is and when I get to the page I see the page I will decide whether or not I want to read it...Usually when I click on the article and a bunch of posts come up, I would not trust the source. Like pop-ups come up. If I want to check what an article actually says and pop ups come up, I don't think it is a credible source. Usually, good websites will be clean and concise, they will not have any destructing popups...If the source is like NY Times, I think it is very credible. If it is a buzzfeed article or another one according those lines. I would not consider that credible. [Madelyn]

Indeed, Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) reviewed the literature on factors that affect website credibility. Among the factors that might increase credibility are “clear distinctions between editorial and advertising content” and “professional.” Advertisements on the websites detract individuals’ attention and hinder differentiation between types of content on a page, especially the advertisements that are intrusive (e.g., pop-up ads)

The previous two cases discuss messages that appear on the news feed of Facebook users, when they browse through it, but not specifically when searching for these messages. In active search cases, when a user actively seeks particular information, they aim at finding a communicator of this information that suits their interests most. For example, there are social media users, for whom one of the main activities on social media is staying connected with famous people they like. They actively seek popular individuals, whose life styles they like and who they would like to associate themselves with. The Internet offers an opportunity for influence-seeking users to choose individuals they can relate to the most, e.g., those who look similar and endorse affordable products. For example, Susan described her social media use as follows:

On Instagram, I find a random person on the main page or whatever is popular... I follow models and fashion designers, whose pictures I like, for example, Coco Rocha. Or some random fashion blogs...There is a beauty blogger, Michele Fan. I remember, she featured it [EOS lip balm], then I saw a bunch of ads on Facebook and really wanted to buy it, even though it was pricy than what I would normally pay for a chopstick. [Susan]

Mingli describes what type of information source is important for him.

Some of them are my friends, some are students that I don't really know, but who are famous. Some of them are celebrities. I am talking about students who are reach: from China, my university, other universities in the U.S. they are rich they like to show off on SM. I don't follow all of them. I don't like those who show off too fancy things. When I decide to follow those who style is close to mine... I don't follow those whose style is very close to mine. I follow those whose style is affordable. This don't have to be a very famous brand, but some good match (too my style). It does not depend on the number of followers, but on the content...Yesterday, I bought a sweatshirt, as I saw the same one on Instagram. I buy from 'Farfetch'. First I see the product they wear and then I check the website. [Mingli]

The findings demonstrate two different situations: one when the content is more important than a source and another, when the source defines how the content is consumed. Consistent with research findings of Kelly, Kerr and Drennan (2010), who showed that individuals avoid advertising on social networking sites mainly because it is irrelevant or comes from a non-credible source, findings from this study suggest the importance of relevant and interesting advertising and adds that such content is more important than the source for ads on social networking sites.

#### **4.2 Five Source Evaluation Strategies**

Trustworthiness is typically defined as "the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid" (Hovland et. al., 1953, p. 21). However, informants expressed a wide variety of methods that they used to trust sources. These methods seemed to vary by the attributes of the information source that individuals use to evaluate the source. Essentially, there were five distinct approaches to trustworthiness that emerged.

Valence of information sources is judged both objectively (e.g., by looking at the communicator's qualification) and subjectively (e.g., by considering factors, such as prior



experience with the source, general attitudes towards different people and groups of people). This is why there is no single method that is used by an individual to verify the trustworthiness of information sources. For individuals, trustworthiness of the source is directly linked to believability of the message that he or she evaluates. The current research shows that different individuals evaluate the same message source using different criteria. These criteria are factors, or dimensions, of an information source that are judged by objective (e.g., number of followers, job titles) or subjective (e.g., prior experience with similar sources) reasons by individuals. Essentially, by allowing the informants to talk freely about the ways that they evaluate trustworthiness, we were able to see the importance of contextual factors. Unlike previous research, there is no single pathway or set of criteria that apply to every source (e.g., Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; McCroskey, 1966; Pornpitakpan, 2004).

Based on the informants' descriptions in this study, I divided the factors into 2 groups of attributes:

Individual attributes of a communicator:

- expertise,
- trustworthiness,
- attractiveness,
- likability,
- similarity.

Socially assigned attributes:

- popularity

For the informants, there were one or two dominant strategies that they used to judge different information sources. The study reveals five dominant combinations or

strategies that individuals apply when they make judgments about message sources and that they use to assess the believability of the message. These are summarized in Table 1. Each strategy highlights the attributes of a message source that individuals seek in a communicator and characteristics that individuals take into account to verify these attributes. Each of these will be discussed next.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Popularity</b>	Main attribute: <b>Popularity</b> Other attributes considered: <b>Physical attractiveness</b>	Ling reveals that a ‘popularity’ factor makes an expert source trustworthy to him. Popularity is indicated by the number of followers. “I will look how many followers this person has”. “You can find a random person on the main page [on Instagram] or whatever is popular and if you like them (they are good-looking) you can just follow them” [Susan]
<b>Source expertise on the subject: a logical evaluation strategy</b>	Main attribute: <b>Expertise</b> Other attributes considered: <b>Trustworthiness</b>	“[tech blogger] I can trust them completely. Since they are experts, I can trust them completely.” (Ya) “I followed a blogger, who gathered opinions from experts. He is not an expert, but other experts send him articles, and he posts them. He is a critical thinker... that means he is trustworthy, as his opinion is neutral, not extreme.” (Yi)
<b>Opinion multiplicity</b>	A mix of attributes	“Since it is online, if I want to buy something, I will compare it on Weibo. I will also read the review from someone who bought this product.” [Ya] “Sometimes they [friends] might post or share something that is not verified...After they post, I check the news website and TV.” [Delun]
<b>Likable group influence</b>	Main attributes: <b>Likability and similarity</b>	“When I buy something expensive and very important to me, like bicycles or tablets, I would directly ask my friends for advice...for example, a ball. I love soccer. If I buy a ball to play soccer with my friends, I will ask them how they like it.” (Ping) “I will pay attention to who wrote the review. If the age is similar and a little bit older than me, I will trust them.” [Ya]
<b>Unbiased Opinion</b>	Main attribute: <b>Trustworthiness</b>	“I will not trust him [Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO]. He is just trying to sell his product”. (Anni) “They are probably, opinioned very strongly to one way or the other. So I don’t know how much credibility they would have”. (Gabrie)

Table 1. Source Evaluation Strategies

## **Popularity .**

Popularity of an information source is a dimension that emerged from the data; this factor also showed significant influence on source valence during source evaluation by informants. In the literature, popularity has been defined as meaning “widely liked, accepted or preferred” (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998, p.126). It has proven to be an effective strategy for advertising (e.g., Dean, 1999), and “an important predictor of social media users’ source credibility” (Jin & Phua, 2014, p. 183).

This study reveals that popularity in social networking sites is understood in two ways. One is based on the “status indicators,” such as the number of friends (Zywica, & Danowski, 2008, p. 2) and corresponds to the notion of sociometric popularity that is “associated with a number of social evaluations” (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell & Walther, 2008, p. 535). Another understanding of popularity is broader than sociometric and stems from the principle of social proof (Cialdini, 2001), which stands for the idea that “we view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it” (p. 100). That is, individuals are generally more likely to be persuaded by the argument, when there are other individuals, who agree with the argument, rather than when there is no one else, who supports that argument. Status indicators are specific (e.g., number of friends, reviews, followers) and can be easily identified by Internet users, while popularity in a broader sense is a tendency to trust the sources that are trusted by other individuals. In the study, the popularity as the attribute of a source is discussed from the point of view of status indicators, as they are referred to in the first definition. The second understanding of popularity is also discussed, as informants mention that they tend to trust or pay attention to something, when they see that their friends are interested in that. For example, Ling mentions that “I decide who to follow based on what my friends are following”. The broad

meaning of popularity is not separate from status indicators, but includes them, as people might use these indicators, as signals of social proof.

Individuals look up to popular people for their opinion. For a message to be believable, the source should be popular. Popularity, or social attractiveness, of the source is typically judged by such status indicators, as the amount of followers, page reviews, likes and comments on the individual's page.

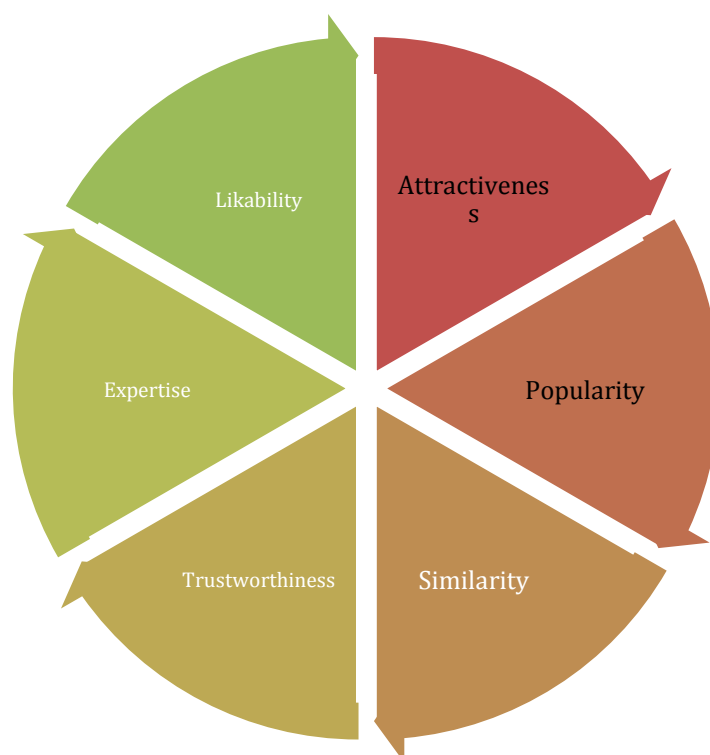


Figure 1. Popularity Strategy (Popularity )

For example, for Delun, popularity in social media is an indicator of credibility.

I don't know this person [Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age], I am not confident about his opinion, **but If this guy seems to be popular on social media, then the credibility goes up.** [Delun]

Delun defines popularity as *"A lot of comments, a couple of hundred likes."*

Popularity is not only a criterion to judge trustworthiness of one source. It is a strategy to evaluate various information sources. Delun uses sociometric indicators of popularity, such as reviews, to also evaluate other information sources (e.g., bloggers):

I follow one YouTube channel, where they make reviews on computers and cars. A lot of reviews makes it credible...They have a host, who dresses very formal and makes me feel that he is worth my trust.  
[Delun]

Mingli also explains that such indicators of popularity, as the number of followers, increase credibility:

It [blogger] had many followers on Weibo, that is why I thought they were credible...It is not a single person. [Mingli].

Similarly, Huian describes how she chooses to follow accounts that are popular on Weibo:

I search for the most hilarious on Weibo. I follow the first one or two. Most of Weibos are copies from each other. I follow the most famous.  
[Huian]

Huian's perceptions of source trustworthiness also depend on status indicators:

[about trustworthiness judgments] I choose Weibo with most fans...10,000 actual Weibo fans means famous. [Huian]

Individuals judge information sources by their social attractiveness, which is increased with the number of followers (likes, comments) that the source has on social media (Tong et al., 2008). Appendix F includes more examples of quotations that represent this popularity strategy. The number of friends in one's social network is an indicator of this person's popularity and attractiveness (Reese, Ziegele-Behnken, Sundar, & Kleck, 2007). Social attractiveness is a type of criteria that these individuals use to gauge trustworthiness of this person. As discussed by Jin and Phua (2014), the large number of followers is an

indicator for online users that this person has great social capital, which increases this person's attractiveness, trustworthiness and credibility.

When evaluating the source, informants in this category also looked for attractive characteristics of an information source. Physical attractiveness is another attribute of a source that affects its perception and influences the believability of the message. Joseph (1982) reviewed the literature on the effects of physical attractiveness and proposed that attractive individuals "are liked more, perceived in more favorable terms and have a positive impact on the products with which they are associated with" (p.15).

Some individuals evaluate both for popularity and physical attractiveness of the information source. Therefore, both attributes are presented in the strategy. For example, Susan mentions that she likes to follow physically and socially attractive (popular) people in social media.

You can find a random person on the main page [on Instagram] or whatever is popular and if you like them (they are good-looking) you can just follow them...I follow celebrities, who are models and fashion designers...I follow Coco Rocha [model]. I also follow beauty bloggers, like Michelle Phan. [Susan]

This observation is not new, as popularity, and sociometric popularity in particular, has been strongly associated with physical attractiveness (e.g., Langlois et al., 2000).

Popularity and attractiveness are key criteria that particular individuals use to judge the source and believability of a message. Judging from the data, it becomes obvious that sociometric indicators of popularity influence perceptions of information source trustworthiness. Sociometric indicators are usually discussed in the literature as cues that individuals use to make judgments about others (e.g., Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). On the Internet these indicators have numeric values associated with particular individuals. This study shows that individuals use the number of followers, 'likes' and other indicators to

judge particular information sources online. Therefore, these indicators are strongly associated with the source and therefore should be discussed as an attribute of an information source in the online environment.

### **Source expertise on the subject: a logical evaluation strategy**

Other informants were more interested in expert opinions as trustworthy sources. “Expertise refers to the extent to which a speaker is perceived to be capable of making correct assertions” (Pornpitakpan, 2004, p. 244). As discussed earlier, expertise is usually discussed as a component of source credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Pornpitakpan (2004) reviewed several decades of literature that discussed characteristics of individuals as message sources and proposed that “the dimensions of source credibility have been commonly identified to consist of expertise and trustworthiness” (p. 244). However, the two-factor approach is not consistent across academic literature. Some researchers explored credibility to have other dimensions, such as dynamism (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969), authoritativeness and character (McCroskey, 1966), and attractiveness (Yoon, Kim, & Kim, 1998). The biggest portion of research on information source credibility deals with credibility measures to evaluating traditional media sources. In the study on credibility of online information sources, Kang (2010) suggests that for the offline and online environment, there should be different approaches to measuring source credibility. The author indicates 5 factors that define source credibility (knowledge, reliability, transparency, authority, and passion).

In this research, the links between trustworthiness and expertise were not always clear. Some message sources are perceived as highly trustworthy, but having low expertise. For example, the informants usually considered family members to be trustworthy, but not

necessarily knowledgeable about technology innovations, which will be explained further in detail.

Other sources are perceived to possess strong expertise, but weak trustworthiness. For example, some informants considered Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, to be an expert on the topic about Apple's products, but also biased and thus less trustworthy, which will be discussed further. Therefore, in order to present the diversity of combinations of a message source's attributes, this study discusses each attribute separately.

The results of this study reveal that some individuals will only trust a source, if it is able to express an expert, unbiased opinion on a particular topic that an individual is interested in. These are message sources that have a demonstrated history of experience in a particular field or are known to possess certain characteristics (e.g., demographic) that might make their opinion very similar to the opinion of a person who receives a message. A distinguishing characteristic of these individuals is in their logical evaluation strategy. They start their evaluation process from the topic of the message and then decide on certain characteristics that a communicator should possess to become a credible source on that topic. In contrast to the individuals who are concerned with a combination of attractiveness, popularity and similarity features of a communicator, these individuals are focused on judging the objectivity of the source's opinion and its knowledge on a certain topic.

Jude chooses WOM information sources that are knowledgeable about the subject he is interested in:

I will see, who tweets about it [a topic he is interested in]... For example, If I want to follow for example, a sports team, I will see who tweets about it, see who is the writer is. [Jude]

He emphasizes his process when he evaluates an unfamiliar informant, who seems to be of the same age and share similar interests.



I would not necessarily distrust them [someone you have never met before, who has similar interests], but I would not be interested in them saying that I guess, as much as someone like an expert that I follow. If it comes from someone I don't know, I would probably wait until it comes from the expert. [Jude]

The importance of expertise on a subject is also emphasized by Kerry.

If something comes up on your news feed that is like a NY Times article, I am more likely to trust that than someone's blog. Just because of where it comes from. Their scene is credible, and you know that they do more research than individual persons.[Kerry]

Expert sources appear to be highly credible informants for these individuals (see more quotations in the Appendix F), while the credibility of single opinions varies. For single opinions, this group of informants explicitly underlines a defining role of previous experience with the source to judge its knowledge on the topic or if it is a single opinion from an unfamiliar communicator, expertise on a subject becomes a defining criterion again. For example, Kerry describes the process in this way:

Previous experience with an individual will dictate how you receive their message...If they [someone you have never met before, but who seems to have similar interests] seem to know a lot about some topic... For example, if that was some group majoring in IT who will write about an Apple product, but I never met them... That might skew it towards trust, as they seem to know what they are talking about. But if that was some random person, with whom we enjoy riding our bikes. It does not really relate to the topic. I don't have a reason to trust or distrust them. [Kerry]

As it was mentioned previously, individuals use the same strategy to evaluate different sources. Kerry considers the expertise of a source and prior experience with the source (family members), when she makes evaluation judgments.

I would probably trust them [Family members] almost completely. Most of the time they had experience with the product, so they can draw from their experience most of the time. **And you have a long history with that person.** So if my aunt posts something like that, I would most likely trust what they say. But there is always like a doubt that it works for them, but will not work for me. [Kerry]

Jude explained his thoughts this way:

I judge credibility by trial and error. I will follow a couple of people on the subject. Then, if I find that one is better than the other, I will probably just unfollow the other and keep the one I like....Anyone can say what they think about the product on SM. If I want to learn more I would go to people, whose job it to tell what the product actually is. [Jude]

Figure 2 highlights 'expertise' as the key attribute of the source that was important for this particular group of informants. Other attributes, such as trustworthiness, could be also salient on some cases. Information source expertise and trustworthiness are two factors that add to credibility of the source (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). It is not surprising that individuals consider both factors when they evaluate an information source. Even though the current study reveals that in the online environment, individuals usually use a single evaluation criterion (e.g., only source expertise or only source trustworthiness), combinations of source attributes might also be evaluated. Susan considers both expertise and bias (trustworthiness) of the source, when evaluating an industry expert.

If I follow them, it means that I think that they know what they are doing, but also they probably make a lot of money of sponsorships. You have to think about that too. [Susan]

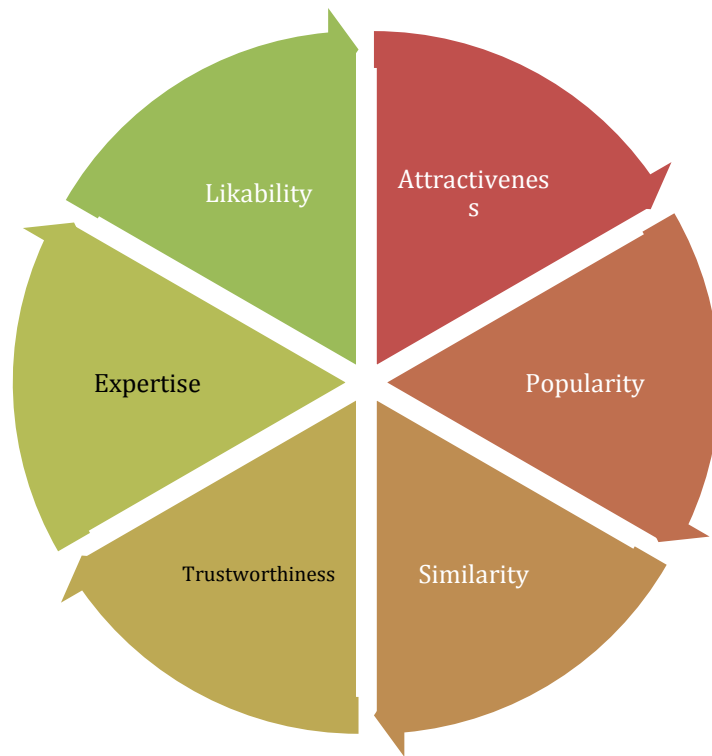


Figure 2. Expertise Strategy

Furthermore, not only expertise of a source is judged, but also credibility of the company, to which this source relates to, increases credibility of the source. In this way, the brand or company serves as a useful heuristic for the informants to quickly and easily judge source credibility. For example, Delun explains:

I will judge them [industry experts] from their profile. If he will be from a trustworthy company, I will trust him...His [Tim Cook, Apple's CEO] might be a little bit subjective...Sometimes, when people talk about the stuff of their interest, I start to doubt it a little bit, but since Apple is a big company, I will trust them. [Delun]

As it can be seen in the previous example, this strategy is used to judge various sources (industry experts, CEO). Susan also thinks about credibility of the company, when she makes judgments about the source of information.

He [Tim Cook, Apple CEO] clearly wants to sell his product. But Apple is a pretty credible company I think, cause I have bought multiple products from them and I like them. [Susan]

These quotes demonstrate that trustworthiness of a source and the message is enhanced by credibility of the company, to which these sources relate. This finding is consistent with the findings by Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell (2000) suggesting that the credibility of the company (corporate credibility) has a strong positive effect on individuals' attitudes towards the message.

In sum, there are individuals who specifically seek an expert, knowledgeable opinion on a specific subject and judge sources according to their specialization and expertise, rather than social popularity. A possible explanation of these differences in strategies used by different individuals might be that individuals who judge a source's expertise are specifically interested in the topic or they consider themselves to be expert in the field. This observation was made by Flanagin and Metzger (2007) who found that experts and those who considered information to be salient were more concerned about the quality of the source credentials when they were making credibility judgments. Therefore, characteristics of the information receiver and his or her involvement in the topic might define the choice of the strategy.

### **Opinion multiplicity**

For particular individuals, in order to trust an information source on social media, it is important to see that there is another source that agrees with this opinion. These individuals seek multiple trustworthy sources that verify information to form an objective opinion. Single information sources, whether it is a credible friend, celebrity or a random Internet user, are not sufficient to be completely trustworthy. Therefore, these individuals seek objectivity by consulting multiple information sources. This finding is consistent with the observation of Metzger et al. (2010), who discuss a cognitive heuristics called 'consistency heuristics', which means "validating information by checking different Web

sites to make sure that the information was consistent” (p. 428). With an access to multiple information sources on the Internet, this approach seems to be a popular, fast and effective means of validating information by online users.

For example, Paul describes a recent purchase:

This summer, it was some audio equipment that I looked up. I asked a few peers if they enjoyed the product, if they used the product. Usually, these are my family members, and then a few musicians. These are usually people that I have met in person....I think a very clever campaign, where everything is the same. If I go and look up I find the same style of writing about it. The same on Facebook, on the website, people who promote it, advertisements. Youtube is the largest place where I find a lot of the information. If I don't find it there I usually go to Google. [Paul]

Madelyn explains her strategy of information verification:

[Industry expert] If there was an article about Apple Pay, I would trust it and read it. Probably, I would read more than one source. I would not trust one source. To make an article valid, if I saw in social media, I would probably Google it more to find out more about it. I don't think that all blogs [Tech blogger] have good information on them. There are a lot of opinions too. I would put it towards distrust, because I don't really know how blogs work. I guess that how all the SM is, it is just all opinions. [Madelyn]

Furthermore, specifically for these individuals, credibility of a single source will be enhanced if the source includes a link to another credible source. For example, Jude explains credibility if there is a link to the website in a message.

Truthfulness depends on the communicator, if they provide the evidence. Are they offering another source that agrees with them or not or are they just putting something out there and that's it? [Jude]

Madelyn indicates how she feels about a source that may be from the same university:

I would not trust completely because I never met this person. They are not giving me any valid information that Apple pay is valid. I would be looking for something describing what Apple pay is and an article by apple attached to it. I would not trust someone saying oh download Apple Pay. [Madelyn]

A link to an external source is an example of a supporting argument that is known to enhance message persuasiveness. Maddux and Rogers (1980) showed that presence of supporting arguments in a message increases a persuasive effect of a message irrespective of the characteristics of a communicator, such as expertise and physical attractiveness. It is also consistent with the supporting argument variable discussed by Pornpitakpan (2004).

### **Likable group influence**

The third strategy captures informants' liking of individuals that are familiar and/or similar to them. "Liking is commonly enhanced by feelings of similarity and familiarity between the agent and the target, and by requester attractiveness" (Sundie, Cialdini, Griskevicius, & Kenrick, 2012, p. 140). This definition by Sundie et al. (2012) proposes three factors of liking: similarity, familiarity and attractiveness. However, in this present study all three attributes of a source are discussed as separate source attributes, which is consistent with previous research on source attributes (e.g., Pornpitakpan, 2004). Thus, similarity and physical attractiveness are discussed separately from 'familiarity' in this study. Therefore, 'familiarity' is a major characteristic of source likability in the study. Likability influences the message receiver's desire to agree with a communicator. For example, Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio (1992) found that a likable source has a strong positive influence on the attitude towards the message that this source communicates.

Similarity between individuals is presented in this study as similarity of demographic and perceptual characteristics of individuals that have already been discussed among the factors that influence WOM communication (e.g., Rogers, 1983).

'Likable group influence' strategy is consistent with the role of 'liking' as an influence tactic (Sundie et al., 2012), which can be explained by the fact that "we are more inclined to comply with another's request when we like the requester" (p. 140). As mentioned

previously, 'liking' is enhanced by similarity between the information source and a receiver as well as the source familiarity.

Informants clearly demonstrate a desire to trust sources that are similar to them in terms of demographic characteristics. For example, Ya describes how she makes judgments about the perceived trustworthiness of family members about a specific topic according to their demographic characteristics:

I think it depends on what member, like my parents or my cousins. Because my parents...there is some age difference. The cousins, we are in the same generation. [Ya]

Other individuals consider perceptual similarity, which can be vividly represented by quotes from Jude and Gabriele (see Appendix F for more quotations). Jude tells about the way he judges whether he will trust the information source on Twitter:

I guess, if I seem to have a personal connection with the writer, if they tend to like the same type of things that I do or if I tend to agree with them, I will probably follow them more. [Gabriele]

Gabriele explains that she will trust an unfamiliar source more, when there are mutual interests.

Will trust...they would have my sense of style, my sense of humor, we will have the same friends, we enjoy the same music. [Gabriele]

This finding is consistent with Rogers (1983), who discussed information sources that are perceived to be similar in terms of demographic and perceptual characteristics to be effective sources of WOM communication. The findings of this study suggest that similarity is judged from users' profiles (e.g., by looking through the content of a personal social media page).

As mentioned by Sundie et al. (2012), liking is associated with the desire of individuals to meet and comply with expectations of other individuals or groups of individuals, whose opinion is important to them to make a decision. These informants

showed their distinct desire to consult with specific influential others, with whom they maintain strong relationship ties, i.e., familiar individuals, such as close friends and family members, who are high on the likability dimension (See Figure 3).

A desire to comply with the expectations of a specific group is one of the processes of social influences proposed by Kelman (1961). Kelman suggests that “compliance can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence from another person or a group because he hopes to achieve a favorable reaction to the other” (p.62). The current study shows that effects of this social influence force is salient for a group of individuals. These individuals seek opinions of close friends or family members specifically regarding the products that are either expensive and/or important to them.

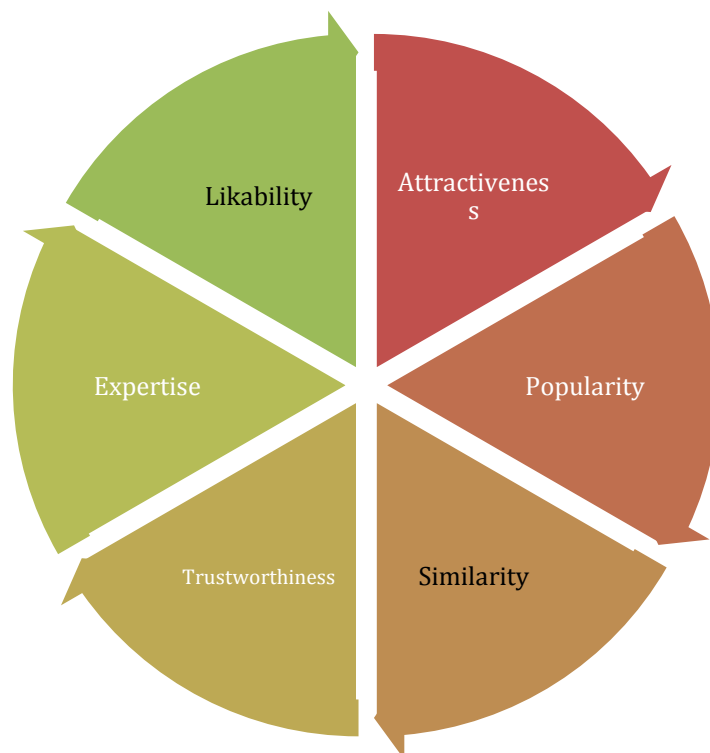


Fig.3. Likable group influence



For example, when Laura was talking about opinions that she usually considered when shopping, several times, she referred to her family members as ultimate sources of approval. Likability (familiarity) of the information source is of particular importance for Laura.

I mostly trust my mom and brother... Usually, if it is something that I need I ask my mom about it, but if it is something that I want, I would ask my brother, because he would know if I would actually use it.  
[Laura]

Ping indicates that from eWOM communication sources he trusts only his friends' opinion online.

They [online reviews] say how cool they are, but actually they are not. When I needed something I went online and checked opinions about the product I wanted to buy. But then you always find something that disappoints you, when you buy it. You feel it is not the same as you see it online. **Now I only ask my friends for advice.** I still check the reviews and ratings, but I don't trust them anymore. [Ping]

Furthermore, Ping looks for approval of his friends about specific products that are important to him:

When I buy something expensive and very important to me, like bicycles or tablets, I would directly ask my friends for advice...for example, a ball. I love soccer. If I buy a ball to play soccer with my friends, I will ask them how they like it. [Ping]

Madelyn also mentions that in certain situations she decides to ask her friends for their opinion:

So I don't usually look at people's comments... I will get advice from friends, but not from people online. If someone seats next to me... If I hang out with my friend, and we do homework or online shopping. I will ask them - do you think this looks good?. I will only ask people that I am with. I will not go search online. [Madelyn]

Thus, informants reveal the importance of social connections (relationship ties) and similarity, when they make judgments about trustworthiness of information sources.

## Unbiased opinion

The key criterion for trustworthiness is the communicator's unbiased opinion on a specific topic. These individuals judge information sources according to communicators' propensity to be biased. They are more likely to trust a person, who they know is credible, because they had experience with this person in the past, than an official source, such as company's website or a company's CEO, which are considered to be biased by these individuals. "Trustworthiness is probably the major dimension underlying source credibility" (Bailey & Cole, 2004, p. 135).

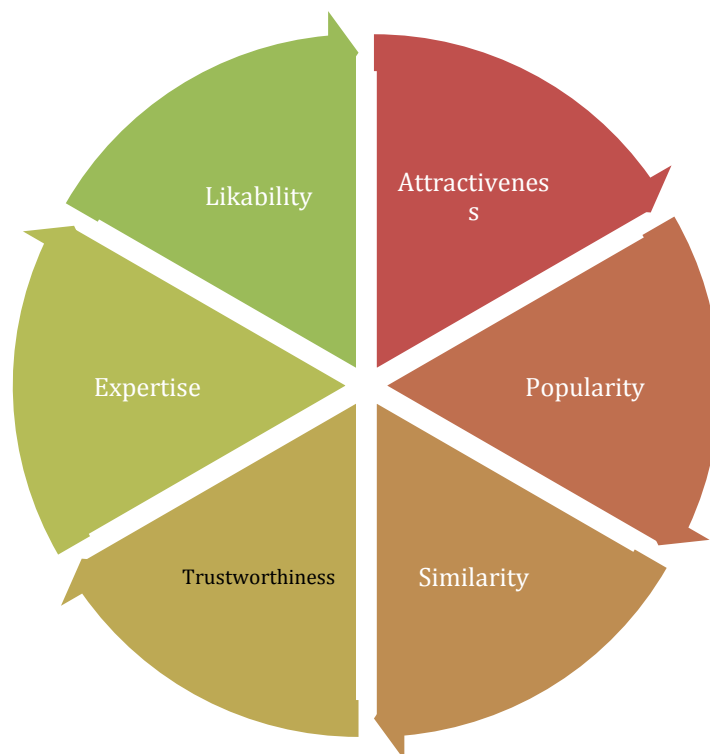


Fig.4. Unbiased opinion

For example, Ai evaluated various sources of information almost exclusively according to their perceived propensity to be biased. Among biased sources is Tim Cook, Apple's CEO's page on social media. *"I will not trust him [Tim Cook, Apple's CEO]. He is just trying to sell his product"*. Ai also evaluates trustworthiness of other sources, such family

members, according to their propensity to be biased: *“I will trust my parents, because they will not advertise the product”*.

Some other informants also focused solely on the potential bias. . For example, Gabriele evaluated a tech blogger in the following way:

They are probably opinioned very strongly to one way or the other. So I don't know how much credibility they would have. [Gabriele]

Huian evaluated all the communicators, which in her opinion could have some relations with the company, resulting in very low judgments on trustworthiness.

I think that they [Industry experts] just want to persuade me...use it for advertising. Every company will say that our app is the perfect one, so please use our app. I think I don't trust them... Sometimes blogger will receive money to help make promotion for the app. I will trust them a little....[Apple's page on Social Media]...distrust completely. [Huian]

The other quotations that represent the strategy can be found in Appendix F.

This strategy emphasizes the tendency of individuals to use a single criterion to judge an information source online. This is consistent with the finding of Metzger (2007), who discovered that “students used a single criterion in their final decision about the quality of the Website” (p. 2080). This finding also questions self-reported versus actual information source evaluation behavior with regards to studies of trustworthiness and credibility online (Metzger, 2007). It is obvious that it does not make any sense to ask individuals to evaluate credibility of an information source on all available criteria, as individuals apparently use only one or two criteria.

### **Summary**

The study shows that individuals use five distinct strategies to evaluate information sources on social media: popularity, source expertise on the subject, opinion multiplicity, likable group influence and unbiased opinion. The identified strategies are consistent with

previous research on online information source evaluation and represent possible cognitive heuristics discussed by Metzger et al. (2010). The authors state that a common evaluation strategy (i.e., heuristics) is employed by Internet information seekers in order “to minimize cognitive effort and mitigate time pressures” (p. 434). As in the study conducted by Metzger et al. (2010), this study confirms that individuals use a common strategy (or heuristics) to evaluate different information sources. However, the strategies proposed in this study go beyond credibility evaluations, as in the study of Metzger et al. (2010) and Kang (2010), and involve other important attributes of the source. These strategies are based on different attributes of an information source, which users consider, when they evaluate an information source, such as likability, physical attractiveness, popularity, trustworthiness, expertise and similarity. The findings of the study cast light on the approaches individuals take to evaluate the source and introduce a new attribute on information source: source popularity, which is usually associated with some numerical value (e.g., the number of followers).

### **4.3 Self, Relationship Links and Groups**

Previous researchers mostly attempted to discover the most effective characteristics of a single information source (e.g., a celebrity endorser; Jin & Phua, 2014). The current study takes a different perspective and investigates individual differences of information receivers in evaluating the trustworthiness of an information source. This research contributes to the literature at least in three ways. First, it shows that in some cases individuals ignore the identification of an information source. Secondly, five distinct strategies are proposed. Finally, it is discovered that individuals consistently use the same strategy to evaluate trustworthiness of various information sources.

Unlike previous research that has linked country or cultural origin to dominant self (e.g., Yuki et. al., 2005), the findings from this study did not reveal that a dominant self-construal could be explained by the culture or country. Informants rated a series of statements about self on a 10-question RIC scale (Kashima & Hardie, 2000). The dominant self was revealed by choosing the most frequently chosen self-aspect. There was no clear pattern of dominant self that differed across country origin. That is, the Chinese students did not necessarily have dominant collective selves. However, several patterns emerged from the data based on the dominant self (but not country origin) and the ways that informants trusted various sources. Each of these will be described next.

#### **4.3.1 Dominant Relational-self**

Informants who were identified as having the dominant relational self appeared to trust unfamiliar communicators that are trusted (followed) by their friends on social media to the same level to which they would trust these communicators themselves. As a reminder, relational selves are characterized by connections and relationships with significant others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In fact, all of the relationalist informants (N=7) put the industry expert source they follow on social media into the same category of trust as where they put the industry expert source followed by their friend (see Appendix G for the table with distributed cards). Interestingly none of the individualistic informants placed these two cards into the same category of trust. All the informants with a dominant individualistic self placed an industry expert source they follow on social media into the category of trust which is higher than the category they put the industry expert source followed by their friend. Following are a few representative quotes from informants explaining their sorting of individuals with a dominant relational self:

It is trustworthy because it is followed by my friend. It is also an expert, but mainly because it is followed by my friend. If my friend trust them, I can trust them. [Ping].

There is not much difference between what I follow or my friend follows. Because if my friend follows, that means that they trust this person. If they trust them, I will trust them too. [Mingli]

I would trust him [industry expert, who is followed by your friend on social media] I would trust completely. It could be someone I just didn't know about or some one I didn't like, but that doesn't mean that they were less truthful. [Jude].

While individuals with a dominant relational self trust their friends, informants with a dominant individual self indicate that they can't trust all of their friends to the same degree. These are two explanations of their evaluation logic provided by Ai and Gabriele:

My friends is not the same as me. I will not trust everyone my friends trust. Everyone have different opinion, maybe someone I will trust, but my friend will not trust. [Ai]

It is difficult. They are experts Industry expert that is followed by your friend on Social Media], but depending on the friend or what their company is, they might not know everything. I don't know how much I would trust that. [Gabriele]

One of the possible explanations of these perceptual differences might be the fact that individualism is strongly associated with a feeling of uniqueness (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Therefore, individualistic people might not necessarily distrust their friends, but rather value their opinion more than someone else's.

This finding (links between relational selves and trusted source with friends) is consistent with Yuki et al. (2005), who concluded that the presence of a relationship link between an individual and an unfamiliar person increases trust in this unfamiliar person. Yuki et al. (2005) showed that the presence of a relationship link was only important for individuals from East Asian culture, but not from the Western culture. Unlike in the study by Yuki et al. (2005), there was no evidence that a relationship link affected the responses of

informants who were born only in the Republic of China. In fact, the importance of a relationship link was rather an attribute of a dominant relational self, but not the national culture. Both informants from the U.S. and China demonstrated a dominant relational self and indicated this same pattern of trust to their social media 'friend' relationship links. Therefore, the results of the current study indicate that the effects (such as trust) of a relationship link exist not only in the offline, but also in the online social environment.

#### **4.3.2 Group trust**

The research also revealed that the usage of 'University' as a grouping criterion to differentiate between in-groups and out-groups is not always valid. That is, just because a certain source hails from the same university as the informant does not necessarily mean that the person will be regarded as part of the in-group or a trusted source.

Previous research on in-group and out-group trust (e.g., Clark & Maass, 1988; Yuki et al., 2005) mostly used experimental design and imposed certain boundaries on what should be considered a group, which defined who would be in a group and who would be out of a group. In the experiments with a student population, it is usually assumed that students from the same school will be considered in-group members and students from other schools will be members of an out-group. Clark and Maass (1988) found that students from the same school were perceived to be more credible than students from other schools. Yuki et al. (2005) used the same "University" criterion to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups. The authors stated that university affiliation was one of the most salient in-groups for their participants, who were also students. They also found that students trusted other students from their university more than students from other universities. The current research reveals that in the online environment this is not always the case. Only one

informant mentioned that the fact that a communicator (a technology blogger from UIUC) who attends the same University influenced perceptions of trust.

If they are from Illinois, I would probably trust them a little bit more than a random tech blogger that I found on the website. [Madelyn]

Two other informants who rated tech bloggers from UIUC higher on trustworthiness did so not because they associated themselves with the school, but due to demographic similarities and credibility of the school itself.

Technologies are something they are interested in and they try to keep up with that. They are also in the same demographic, then I can relate to them in that way. Maybe I would like it, because we will have similar needs. [Kerry]

Another informant mentions that credibility of the University influences the trustworthiness of the source.

If they are not assigned by the company, they will not be very credible. This blogger is from UIUC. It is a big university, so I trust him. [Ling]

A possible explanation of this finding might be that a technology blogger from UIUC was compared to just a 'technology blogger', but not a 'technology blogger from another University', so that the in-group and out-group borders become more obvious (see Appendix H for complete distribution of the cards by informants). In sum, there was no evidence that group boundaries that were used in previous research studies (e.g., country, University) existed in the online environment.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, the main findings with regard to the research questions are summarized and general conclusions based on the findings of the studies presented in this thesis are described. Furthermore, the limitations of this thesis are considered and suggestions for further research into trustworthiness of online information sources are presented. This chapter concludes with managerial implications for industry professionals.

#### **5.1 Summary and Theoretical Contributions**

The research goal of the study was to examine how individuals make judgments about trustworthiness of word-of-mouth information sources on social media. This goal was achieved by exploring individual perceptions of various information sources using qualitative interview and card game research methods. Another objective of the study was to cast light on the role of an information receiver and his or her dominant self in a source evaluation process.

The research offers three areas of research findings. The first area of findings reveals instances when a source of information plays a decisive role and when it is insignificant. The second area discusses five strategies that individuals use to evaluate information sources on social media. Finally, the third area of findings deals with the influence of a self-concept on judgments about perceived trustworthiness of an online information source.

First, the study reveals that in some cases the source of the information does not matter much to an information receiver when it appears in a social media news feed as a suggested advertising message. In other cases, however, the source is the first thing that is evaluated, e.g., famous people on social media.

The results of the study showed that individuals use several strategies to evaluate information sources on social media: popularity, source credibility on the subject, opinion multiplicity, likable group influence and unbiased opinion. These strategies are built upon a number of attributes of an information source, which users take into consideration, when they evaluate a source, such as likability, physical attractiveness, popularity, trustworthiness, expertise and similarity. Furthermore, individuals differ in the strategies that they use to evaluate information sources. The current research shows that users use one or two strategies to evaluate various information sources, i.e., for every strategy, individuals evaluate different information sources using the same group of attributes.

Based on the findings, the study makes several theoretical contributions to the areas of online information evaluation. First of all, this study calls attention to different attributes of information sources. Previous research studies conducted on information source evaluation (e.g., Metzger et al., 2010; Dou, Walden, Lee & Koo, 2012) considered only source credibility as a factor that influences judgments about the source. However, this research study demonstrates that individuals take into consideration other source attributes, e.g. similarity and attractiveness, when they make judgments about the source. Therefore, the research suggests that there are a variety of attributes that contribute to the perceived trustworthiness of an information source in the online environment. Furthermore, it was obvious that a 'popularity' factor was a crucial indicator of source trustworthiness, which makes 'popularity' another attribute of source trust in the social media environment. On social media, the number of 'followers', 'likes', 'comments' and other indicators of online popularity (status indicators) are attributes of every social media account, which makes them an integral part of an account owner's social media identity. It is impossible to disregard a 'popularity' factor when judging trustworthiness on social

media. Therefore, it becomes a crucial attribute of an information source on social media that was previously associated with sociometric popularity (Tong et al., 2008). This study shows that status indicators are not just factors of popularity, but integral attributes of information sources on social media.

Another theoretical contribution of this study comes from the strategies that individuals use to evaluate multiple sources of information. Metzger et al. (2010) were first to examine users' approaches towards evaluation of information sources online. The authors proposed credibility assessment strategies, some of which are similar to the strategies proposed in current study (e.g., 'consistency heuristics' and 'opinion multiplicity'). The current study took the next step and by means of a qualitative research approach explored the process of information source evaluation. Five strategies were identified. The research contributes to existing literature by demonstrating that individuals use the same strategy to evaluate different information sources on social media.

Finally, the study casts light on how relational, individualistic and collectivist self-construals work in source evaluation in the online environment. No prior research exists on how dominant selves impact interpretations of credibility judgments in the social media environment. The results of this research study indicate that relationship links that are formed and maintained through social media are similar to relationship links that exist in the offline environment. As mentioned earlier, Yuki et al. (2005) found that for relationalists, the presence of a relationship link can have a strong effect on trust even when a source of information is a member of another group (e.g., university, country). Taking findings of Yuki et al. (2005) into the online environment, this study demonstrates that a relationship link translates into the social media environment in a form of social media 'friendship'. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that dominant self-aspects are

not attributed to specific cultures. This might be another characteristic of the democratized Internet environment and fodder for future research.

## **5.2 Managerial Implications**

The study suggests that consumers of online content often gauge the source intentions and background. This has several implications for industry experts. First, advertisers who wish to utilize people's testimonials for advertising purposes should consider providing information about the sources, e.g., website entrepreneur.com provides guidelines for advertisers on how to use customers' testimonials. It is proposed that in order for a testimonial to be effective and trustworthy, specific information about a source should be provided, such as first and last name, and hometown as well as some indicators that a testimonial comes from a source that other customers can relate to. Second, the fact that individuals search for different and specific cues to judge the source depending on the user and his or her interests means that, when devising a marketing strategy, advertisers should focus on systematic collection of relevant information about their target audience to understand which sources of information their audience would trust most. In other words, such information as, for example, demographic characteristic, interest and lifestyles of a target audience should be systematically collected to inform advertisers about the target audience, so that they can then use testimonials from customers that other customers can relate to.

Another recommendation for industry professionals concerns the way that users consume online content. SapientNitro (2014) reports about an evident phenomenon, which is referred to as 'snackable consumption' of digital media content. That is, "... people use smart devices to 'shop in increments,' moving comfortably from one digital destination to the next, grabbing bite-sized information" (p. 18). Several findings in the study suggest that,

when advertising online, it is not enough to use one or even a couple of sources to transfer an advertising message. To be credible and effective in the online environment, today advertisers must utilize multiple media sources and platforms and be consistent across all of the media. For example, the current study shows that some users might find an interesting article on social media, then go to another website to actually read it. Users might read about an interesting topic or product on a social media site, then search about it on the Internet, go to the official website, read online reviews and on top of that ask their friends about it. Thus, today to win a customer, advertisers should understand and create the entire experience that is communicated through a variety of media sources in a consistent manner.

### **5.3 Limitations**

The participants in the studies presented in this thesis were all affiliated with the Department of Advertising. This means that they may be more interested and informed about word-of-mouth advertising than other students as well as individuals from other demographic groups. The findings described in this thesis might be limited by this selection of participants. This needs to be taken into consideration when these conclusions are transferred to situations in which participants are present who have less clear ideas about how advertising works.

All the participants in the study appeared to be Apple users. So, they might be biased towards Apple products and the trust towards the brand and advertising messages about the product could be skewed and/or exaggerated.

### **5.4 Future Research**

Several informants expressed their interest in following popular individuals on social media. Moreover, the informants mentioned that they pay attention and are influenced by

the products (e.g., clothes) these popular people demonstrate on their social media accounts. However, these popular individuals are not necessarily celebrities (e.g., singers and actors) whose product endorsements in various media have long been considered an effective advertising strategy (e.g., Jin & Phua, 2014), but rather ordinary people. The question is why these new ‘celebrities’ are popular and what makes these endorsees trustworthy and influential. In the future, researchers could explore this new social media phenomenon, as it might have implications for practitioners.

The study discussed source evaluation strategies that users develop and use to gauge source trustworthiness. It becomes clear that different individuals employ different evaluation strategies. For example, whereas some individuals consider popularity indicators, others primarily examine source expertise. It does not mean however that individuals use the same strategy to evaluate all the information sources they encounter, which suggests that future research should investigate in which occasions particular strategies are used more often than others and which factors (e.g., product, environment) might influence decisions to use one or another strategy.

The current study focuses on patterns of source evaluation processes and does not take into consideration the involvement or knowledge of individuals in the evaluation processes. Some individuals might elaborate more than others, which might influence what criteria they will take into consideration to make judgments about the source. Further research is also needed to understand how often heuristic versus more analytic strategies are used in credibility evaluations, and under what conditions users employ one strategy over the other.

Future research should also explore how relationship links and groups are formed and what they mean to users. Previously, researchers used physical borders of the country

to separate individuals with distinct dominant selves (e.g., Yuki et al., 2005; Chen & West, 2007). Geographic location served as a guideline for professionals, who wanted to use behavioral and motivational implications of distinct cultures. For example, if an individual was from East Asia, it could be assumed that he or she would value relationship links more than group boundaries (e.g., Yuki et al, 2005). However, in the online environment, where it is much more difficult to separate users into groups by country, it is not yet understood what criteria could be used to identify a salient dominant self to make corresponding inferences. Therefore, future research could explore online traits of individuals with different dominant self-aspects to attempt to identify them in the online environment. Future research might also consider exploring how mood affects individuals' propensity to reveal their different dominant self. According to the dual process model of mood (Cunningham, 1986), a negative mood tends to produce an egocentric orientation and includes self-reflection and decreased social interest. Therefore, individuals in a negative mood might be more likely to reveal a dominant individual self rather than a relational self. Then, individuals' mood might be one of the cues to reveal this individual's dominant self-aspect in the Internet environment.

In summary, the notion of popularity in online environments should be revised and researched in depth, because being an attribute of an information source, popularity has shown to influence source trustworthiness. Also, future research should focus on discovering ways to identify individuals' dominant selves and their effects on individuals' judgments and behaviors online.

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## APPENDIX A INFORMANT PROFILES

	Name*	Nationality	Gender	RIC
<b>1</b>	<b>Ya</b>	Chinese	Female	Relational
<b>2</b>	<b>Jude</b>	American	Male	Relational
<b>3</b>	<b>Gabrie</b>	American	Female	Individualistic
<b>4</b>	<b>Ling</b>	Chinese	Male	Relational
<b>5</b>	<b>Ai</b>	Chinese	Female	Individualistic
<b>6</b>	<b>Delun</b>	Chinese	Male	Individualistic
<b>7</b>	<b>Huian</b>	Chinese	Female	Individualistic
<b>8</b>	<b>Mingli</b>	Chinese	Male	Relational
<b>9</b>	<b>Susan</b>	American	Female	Relational/Individualistic
<b>10</b>	<b>Ping</b>	Chinese	Male	Relational
<b>11</b>	<b>Madelyn</b>	American	Female	Relational
<b>12</b>	<b>Kerry</b>	American	Female	Relational
<b>13</b>	<b>Lucy</b>	American	Female	Individualistic
<b>14</b>	<b>Hua</b>	Chinese	Female	Individualistic/ Relational
<b>15</b>	<b>Laura</b>	American	Female	Collectivist
<b>16</b>	<b>Paul</b>	American	Male	Individualistic

Table 2. Informant profiles

\* In order to keep the names of informants confidential, pseudonyms are used.

## APPENDIX B

### QUESTIONNAIRE

- Tell me about your social media behavior. What social networking sites do you use?
- Who do you include into your friend group? Have you met all of your friends on social in person? How do you decide who to add to you friend group on social media? How do you interact with your news feed? How do you interact with the content that your friends post? How do you trust your friends' posts on social media? Do you trust their recommendations/opinion?
- Do you follow someone you don't know? Do you follow famous people, professionals, brands, products? Could you provide an example? Who are these celebs/famous people? (similar to you? Do you trust their opinion? How do you decide who to follow? How do you judge their credibility?
- Where do you to read online news? Do you follow any news sources? Do you read any expert opinions? Do you trust your parents', friends' recommendations? Whose opinion do you usually trust?
- How do you discover products and brands online? Where do you go to search for the product? How do you evaluate the product? What do you pay attention to, when you evaluate the product (features, design)?
- What sources do you consult, when you evaluate the product online? Do you pay attention to reviews/ratings? Do you pay attention to who posts a review? How do you evaluate the source of such information?
- Do you use SNSs to learn about a product or brand? Tell me about this experience? Where do you look for such information? Have you ever bought something you saw on social media?

(card game)

- Which social media user or source of information will you trust most?
- Who do you think of when you read "industry expert", "One of your Social Media friends", "best friend", "tech blogger", etc.
- How would you describe the unfamiliar source? "Someone ...", etc.
- Do you follow any tech bloggers, experts on social media?
- How do you understand that a source is trustworthy?

## APPENDIX C SCENARIO AND CARDS

### Scenario

Let's say, you have recently heard that Apple introduced an updated application payment services: Apple Pay. You have heard that this payment service allows you to store your debit/credit cards in a mobile application and then use this application to make payments. You were browsing one of the social networks and came across the messages about Apple Pay.

Please, distribute the messages into 5 categories depending on the degree to which you trust the source of a message.

### Cards

<b>Family member</b> Sent money to my son while he was on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay
<b>One of your Social Media friends</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay
<b>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University, which your friend attends</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay
<b>Tech blogger</b> Receive money while you are on date and run out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Industry experts that you follow on social media</b> Receive money while you are on date and run out of cash #ApplePay
<b>Tech blogger from UIUC</b> Receive money while you are on date and run out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Industry experts that is followed by your friend on social media</b> Receive money while you are on date and run out of cash #ApplePay
<b>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</b> Receive money while you are on date and run out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Apple's page on Social Media</b> Receive money while you are on date and run out of cash #ApplePay
<b>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay	<b>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</b> Received money while on date and ran out of cash #ApplePay

Table 3. Card game cards

## **APPENDIX D**

### **RIC SCALE**

#### **1. I think it is most important in life to**

- Have personal integrity/be true to myself. (I)
- Have good personal relationships with people who are important to me. (R)
- Work for causes to improve the well-being of my group (e.g. my school, church, club, neighborhood, and community). (C)

#### **2. I would teach my children**

- To be caring to their friends and attentive to their needs. (R)
- To know themselves and develop their own potential as a unique individual. (I)
- To be loyal to the group to which they belong. (C)

#### **3. I regard myself as**

- A good member of my group. (C)
- Someone with his or her own will, individual. (I)
- A good partner and friend. (R)

#### **4. I think that honor can be attained by**

- Being true to other people which whom I have personal relationships. (R)
- Being true to myself. (I)
- Being true to my groups such as my extended family, work group, religious and social groups. (C)

#### **5. I would regards someone as a good employee for a company if**

- He or she takes personal responsibility for task assigned. (I)
- He or she works for the development of the organization or the work group. (C)
- He or she gets on well and works cooperatively with other colleagues. (R)

#### **6. The most satisfying activity for me is**

- Doing something for myself. (I)
- Doing something for my group. (C)
- Doing something for someone who is important to me. (R)

#### **7. When faced with an important personal decision to make,**

- I talk with my partner or best friend. (R)
- I ask myself what I really want to do most. (I)
- I talk to my family and relatives. (C)

#### **8. I would feel proud if**

- A group to which I belong was praised in the newspaper for what they have done. (C)
- My close friend was praised in the newspaper for what he or she has done. (R)
- I was praised in the newspaper for what I have done. (I)

#### **9. When I attend a musical concert**

- I feel that enjoying music is a very personal experience. (I)
- I feel good to be part of the group. (C)
- I feel enjoyment if my company (partner, friend, guest) also enjoys it. (R)

#### **10. I am most concerned about**

- My relationship with myself. (I)
- My relationship with a specific person. (R)
- My relationship with my group. (C)

Source: Kashima and Hardie (2000).

## APPENDIX E CODING PROCEDURE

### Example 1

Interview Data	Open Coding What is happening here?	Axial Coding What is found in common?	Selective Coding What is salient?
“His [Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO] opinion might be a little bit subjective. He defiantly wants to say something in favor of Apple. Sometimes, when people talk about their stuff of their interest, I start to doubt a little bit, but since Apple is a big company, I will trust him.” (Delun)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEO has a subjective opinion</li> <li>• CEO is biased</li> <li>• Subjective opinion reduce trustworthiness</li> <li>• Biased opinion reduce trustworthiness</li> <li>• <b>Credible company increase trustworthiness</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Positive effect of corporate credibility</b></li> <li>• Biased opinion reduce trustworthiness</li> </ul>	Effect of corporate credibility on perceived trustworthiness on social media
“I will judge them [industry expert] from their profile. If he is from a trustworthy company, I will trust him” (Delun)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make judgments from a profile</li> <li>• <b>Credible company increase trustworthiness</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Positive effect of corporate credibility</b></li> </ul>	
“He [Tim Cook, Apple CEO] clearly wants to sell his product. But Apple is a pretty credible company I think, cause I have bought multiple products from them and I like them”. (Susan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEO is biased</li> <li>• Biased opinion reduce</li> <li>• <b>Credible company increase trustworthiness</b></li> <li>• Positive effect of prior experience with the product/company</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Positive effect of corporate credibility</b></li> <li>• Biased opinion reduce trustworthiness</li> </ul>	

Table 4. Corporate credibility card sorting

## Example 2

Interview Data	Open Coding What is happening here?	Axial Coding What is found in common?	Selective Coding What is salient?
“...I am not confident about his opinion, but If this guy seems to be popular on any SM, then the credibility goes up” ...[popular means]...a lot of comments, a couple of hundred likes” (Delun)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trust if popular</li> <li><b>Number of comments makes a source popular</b></li> <li><b>Popular is credible</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of comments makes a source popular</li> <li>Popular is credible</li> </ul>	popularity (sociometric)
[tells how he will judge credibility of the source on social media] “I will look at the number of followers” (Ling).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Credibility is judged by the number of followers</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Credibility is judged by the number of followers</li> </ul>	
“Other people I follow are famous, with a lot of followers. They are famous on the internet” (Mingli)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>number of followers increase trustworthiness</b></li> <li>Follows famous people</li> <li><b>Number of followers increase popularity</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>number of followers increase trustworthiness and popularity</li> </ul>	

Table 5. Popularity card distribution



Example 3

Interview Data	Open Coding What is happening here?	Axial Coding What is found in common?	Selective Coding What is salient?
"Since it is online, if I want to buy something, I will compare it on Weibo. I will also read the review from someone who bought this product." (Ya)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>single source is not trustworthy</li> <li>Distrust, because online</li> <li><b>consults multiple trusted sources of eWOM</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>consults multiple trusted sources of eWOM</li> </ul>	Seeks multiple opinions to trust (opinion multiplicity strategy)
"[Industry expert] If there was an article about Apple Pay, I would trust it and read it. Probably, I would read more than one source. <b>I would not trust one source.</b> To make an article valid, if I saw in social media, I would probably Google it more to find out more about it" (Madelyn).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>seeks multiple opinions</b></li> <li>supporting information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks multiple opinions</li> </ul>	
"Sometimes they [friends] might post or share something that is not verified...After they post, I check the news website and TV." (Delun)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>single online source is not trustworthy</li> <li><b>consults multiple sources to verify the information</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>consults multiple sources to verify the information</li> </ul>	

Table 6. Opinion multiplicity card distribution

**APPENDIX F**  
**FIVE STRATEGIES (QUOTES, CODES AND ATTRIBUTES)**

Popularity	<p>1) "I don't follow specific brands... but there is a popular blogger... among international students in the US, they will always see this blog and find that discount. I follow it." (Ya).  CODE: trust to what is popular among peers  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (social proof)</p> <p>2) "I like following trends [fashion], so if I see that a lot of people are buying something, I would look into that" (Gabrie)  CODE : interested, when becomes popular,  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (social proof)</p> <p>3) "I decide who to follow based on what my friends are following" (Ling)  CODE : attention to what is popular among peers  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (social proof)</p> <p>4) [tells how he will judge credibility of the source on social media] "I will look at the number of followers" (Ling).  CODE : number of followers – popular  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>5) Ling reveals that a 'popularity' factor makes an expert source trustworthy to him. Popularity is indicated by the number of followers. "I will look how many followers this person has".  CODE : number of followers is considered, when credibility is evaluated  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>6) Ai uses another cue to identify a famous person on social media, which is a 'W'-icon on Weibo. The presence of the icon makes this source credible for Ai. "On Weibo, we have a certification. If you are a celebrity, you get a certification, you can get like a little 'W' on your photo, so everyone will know that you are a celebrity...This is how I distinguish between credible, not credible."  CODE : W-icon increase trustworthiness, identification of a celebrity  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>7) Delun mentions the number of likes as an indicator of popularity and the reason for him to pay attention to the message.  "I follow people whose pictures I like, their lifestyle. If there are a lot of likes, I might pay attention to it".  CODE : number of 'likes'  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p>
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Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes)

	<p>8) When talking about the blogger, whose opinion Delun trusts, he tells what makes this blogger credible for him “I follow one tech blog. They talk about computers, cars. A lot of reviews make them credible”.  CODE : number of reviews on a social media page  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>9) For Delun popularity on social media is an indicator of credibility. “I don’t know this person [Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age], I am not confident about his opinion, but if this guy seems to be popular on any SM, then the credibility goes up”.  CODE : popularity increase credibility of an unfamiliar source, opinion similarity  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (social proof)</p> <p>10) Delun defines popularity as “...a lot of comments, a couple of hundred likes.”  CODE : number of comments, ‘likes’  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>11) “Other people I follow are famous, with a lot of followers. They are famous on the Internet” (Mingli)  CODE : number of followers increase trustworthiness  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>12) Mingli describes people he follows on social media for their looks and style. These are famous students from other universities. In this case, not only popularity criteria is considered, but also demographic similarities (students). “Some are students that I don’t really know, but who are famous. Some of them are celebrities. I am talking about students who are reach: from China, my university, other universities in the U.S. they are rich they like to show off on SM. I follow those, whose style is close to mine”.  CODE : influenced by other popular users, similar demographic group  ATTRIBUTE: popularity, similarity (social proof)</p> <p>13) “It had many followers on Weibo, that is why I thought they were credible...It is not a single person” (Mingli).  CODE : number of followers increase trustworthiness  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>14) “I search for the most hilarious on Weibo. I follow the first one or two. Most of Weibos are copies from each other. I follow the most famous”...”[about trustworthiness judgments] I choose Weibo with most fans...10 000 actual Weibo fans means famous” (Huian).  CODE : most famous are at the top of the search  ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p>
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Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>15) “If it is a popular brand or artist that many people like, then I will be more likely to check it out.” (Susan) CODE : number of ‘likes’ increase trustworthiness ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>16) “It depends on whether they [tech blogger] are popular or not. If they are slightly popular. For example, if they were featured in the newspaper, or I have heard of them before” (Susan) CODE : popularity increases trustworthiness, featured in the newspaper, familiar ATTRIBUTE: popularity</p> <p>17) Susan answers the question about how she judges credibility: “If a lot of people like or follow it then i would be more likely to check it out”. CODE : popularity (number of likes, followers) increases trustworthiness ATTRIBUTE: popularity (sociometric)</p> <p>18) “you can find a random person on the main page [on Instagram] or whatever is popular and if you like their stuff you can just follow them...I like fashion...I follow celebrities, who are models and fashion designers. I also follow beauty bloggers, like Michelle Phan” (Susan). CODE : likable, famous, attractive ATTRIBUTE: likability, popularity, physical attractiveness</p>
Expertise on the subject: logical evaluation	<p>1) [Family members] “I think about parents... They have experience, so they will know, whether the product is good or not” (Ya) CODE : trust because knowledgeable ATTRIBUTE: expertise, knowledge is evaluated</p> <p>2) “[tech blogger] I can trust them completely. Since they are experts, I can trust them completely.”(Ya) CODE : trust expert opinion, knowledge is evaluated ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p> <p>3) “I will see, who tweets about it [a topic he is interested in]...If I want to follow for example, a sports team, I will see who tweets about it, see who the writer is.” (Jude) CODE: seeks knowledgeable source ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p> <p>4) “I would not necessarily distrust them, but I would not be interested in them saying that I guess, as much as someone like an expert that I follow. I would look to the experts”. “If it comes from someone I don’t know, I would probably wait until it comes from the expert.” (Jude) CODE : trust because knowledgeable, knowledge about the product is evaluated ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p>

Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>5) “Anyone can say what they think about the product on SM. If I want to learn more I would go to people, whose job it to tell what the product actually is.” (Jude)  CODE: source must be knowledgeable and expert  ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p> <p>6) “Truthfulness depends on the communicator for if they provide the evidence. Are they offering another source that agrees with them or not? Or they just putting something out there and that’s it.” (Jude)  CODE: seeks evidence of credibility, another source  ATTRIBUTE: expertise (knowledge)</p> <p>7) “My dad knows more about technology. So if he posted something like that, I would pay more attention to it. He would know better than my mom.” (Gabrie)  CODE: more knowledge more trust  ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p> <p>8) “[One of your social media friends]... I consider this not very trustworthy, because it is not official news. Maybe, I will think that my friends just brag.” (Ling)  CODE: will trust an official source  ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p> <p>9) “Even though we share similar interests [Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests], but it doesn’t mean that we think in the same way about an application. If we share the same interests related to a product, maybe I will believe more. We both like swimming and you tell me about ApplePay, I will not believe you.” (Ai)  CODE: Seeks knowledge about a subject  ATTRIBUTE: Expertise</p> <p>10) “I will trust only the company and the official website, because they actually make a product. I will not trust others completely”. (Mingli)  CODE: Trust expert, knowledgeable source  ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p> <p>11) “If I follow them, it means that I think that they know what they are doing, but also they probably make a lot of money of sponsorships. You have to think about that too”. (Susan)  CODE: knowledgeable, possibility of a bias  ATTRIBUTE: Expertise, trustworthiness</p>
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Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>12) “I don’t pay attention to what they [friends] post about brands and products. if want to buy a bicycle, I will ask those friends, who have a bicycle, for example, on Wechat...” (Ping) CODE: trust friends’ opinion about a specific product, knowledgeable ATTRIBUTE: Expertise</p> <p>13) “Because he [Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO] is very knowledgeable about the subject. I think it is a great company...I would trust this source” CODE: knowledgeable, bias is not considered, credible company ATTRIBUTE: Expertise</p> <p>14) “If something comes up on your news feed that is like NY Times article, I am more likely to trust that than someone’s blog. Just because of where it comes from. Their scene is credible, and you know that they do more research than individual persons.”(Kerry) CODE: trust knowledgeable sources, objective ATTRIBUTE: Expertise</p> <p>15) “If they [someone you have never met before, but who seems to have similar interests] seem to know a lot about some topic... For example, if that was some group majoring in IT who will write about an Apple product, but I never met them... That might skew it towards trust, as they seem to know what they are talking about. But if that was some random person, with whom we enjoy riding our bikes. It does not really relate to the topic. I don’t have a reason to trust or distrust them.” (Kerry) CODE: seeks source’s expertise on the subject ATTRIBUTE: Expertise</p> <p>16) “I would probably trust them [Family members] almost completely. Most of the time they had experience with the product, so they can draw from their experience most of the time. And you have a long history with that person. So if my aunt posts something like that, I would most likely trust what they say. But there is always like a doubt that it works for them, but will not work for me.” (Kerry) CODE: seeks source’s expertise on the subject ATTRIBUTE: Expertise</p>
Credible company (expertise)	<p>1) Ling tells he will trust the tech blogger, because of the blogger is associated with a credible company. “...It is just like a blogger [Tech blogger from UIUC] for the whole company, so they will choose the credible person...This person must be very important, as he handle original sources to let everybody who follows this account know. ...If they are not assigned by the company, they will not be very credible. This blogger is from UIUC. It is a big university, so I trust him.” (Ling) CODE: trust a source that is supported by credible company, source is knowledgeable</p>

Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>2) “His opinion might be a little bit subjective. He defiantly wants to say something in favor of Apple... but since Apple is a big company, I will trust him.” (Delun) CODE: biased, subjective opinion, credibility of the company</p> <p>3) “I will judge them [industry experts] from their profile. If he will be from a trustworthy company i will trust him”. CODE: trustworthiness of the company increases trust in a source</p> <p>4) “He [Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO] has intentions to sell his product. I would be either neutral or slightly trust. He clearly wants to sell his product. But Apple is a pretty credible company” CODE: biased, credibility of the company increases trust in a source</p>
Similarity (Likable group influence)	<p>1) “[family members] I think it depends of what member, like my parents or my cousins. Because my parents...there is some age difference. The cousins, we are in the same generation” (Ya) CODE: trust based on demographic similarity ATTRIBUTE: demographic (age) similarity</p> <p>2) Ya describes, how she judges users on social media. She says that she searches for users with similar interests. “I will see their blogs, where they show whether they like something. On Waibo, on the website they will tell you that this person you might be interested in, because you share the same interest and I will choose to maybe talk to them.” (Ping) CODE: trust based on similarity of interest ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p> <p>3) “I will pay attention to who wrote the review. If the age is similar and a little bit older than me, I will trust them.” (Ya) CODE: trust based on demographic similarity ATTRIBUTE: demographic (age) similarity</p> <p>4) “I guess, if I seem to have a personal connection with the writer, if they tend to like the same type of things that I do or if I tend to agree with them, I will probably follow them more.” (Jude) CODE: trust based on similarity of interest ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p> <p>5) “it will depend on whether they seem to share the same interests, then I will trust them.” (Gabrie) CODE: trust when similar interests ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p>

Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>6) “Will trust more, if they would have my sense of style, my sense of humor, we will have the same friends, we enjoy the same music.” (Gabrie) CODE: trust when similar interests ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p> <p>7) [Your best friend] “We like the same thing. So whatever she shares, I will be interested in.” (Gabrie) CODE: trust when similar interests ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p> <p>8) About [Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC] “It is not distrusting, but it won’t be as strong of a trust, just because I don’t know if we know each other at all, if we have the same interests. We probably don’t have some much in common besides the school. ” (Gabrie) CODE: no indicator of similar interests no trust, group does not increase trust ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p> <p>9) “I think I will trust this person a little more [Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests]. If we have similar interests, it is more likely that we will become friends with this person, because we have similar taste.” (Susan) CODE: similar interests increase trust ATTRIBUTE: perceptual similarity</p>
Likability (Likable group influence)	<p>1) Gabriele says that she follows people she likes on Facebook, even when she might not know them in person: “people that seem to me have an interesting life is another thing for me, so you can see what they are doing all the time. FB is the best for creeping on people.” CODE: likable ATTRIBUTE: likability</p> <p>3) “They [online reviews] say how cool they are, but actually they are not. When I needed something I went online and checked opinions about the product I wanted to buy. But then you always find something that disappoints you, when you buy it. You feel it is not the same as you see it online. Now I only ask my friends for advice. I still check the reviews and ratings, but I don’t trust them anymore.”(Ping) CODE: trust to friends’ opinions, trust to familiar information sources, online reviews are not credible ATTRIBUTE: likability (familiarity)</p> <p>4) “When I buy something expensive and very important to me, like bicycles or tablets, I would directly ask my friends for advice...for example, a ball. I love soccer. If I buy a ball to play soccer with my friends, I will ask them how they like it.” (Ping) CODE: trust friends for their opinion, seeks friends’ approval ATTRIBUTE: likability</p>

Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)



	<p>5) "It [Industry expert that is followed by your friend] is trustworthy because it is followed by my friend. It is also an expert, but mainly because it is followed by my friend... it [a trustworthy friend on social media] is someone I really know and familiar with" (Ping). CODE: trust sources followed by friends, trust expert sources, familiarity increases trustworthiness ATTRIBUTE: likability (familiarity), expertise</p> <p>6) " So I don't usually look at people's comments... I will get advice from friends, but not from people online. If someone seats next to me... If I hang out with my friend, and we do homework or online shopping. I will ask them - do you think this looks good?. I will only ask people that I am with. I will not go search online..." (Madelyn) CODE: trust friends' opinion, don't trust online reviews ATTRIBUTE: likability</p> <p>7) "I mostly trust my mom and brother... Usually, if it is something that I need I ask my mom about it, but if it is something that I want, I would ask my brother, because he would know if I would actually use it" (Laura). CODE: trust family members, turn to different family members for advice depending of a product ATTRIBUTE: likability (familiarity)</p> <p>8) Laura tells about the people she trusts an social media. She emphasizes that she will trust familiar friends, those friends she stays in touch with. "I don't trust all of the friends... After high school, I deleted people that I am not gonna talk to again. So it is like mostly people that I know or can say hi to. So I trust them. " CODE: trust friends from a friend group, familiarity leads to trust ATTRIBUTE: likability (familiarity)</p>
Opinion multiplicity	<p>1) Ya consults multiple trusted sources before makes purchase decision: "Since it is online, if I want to buy something, I will compare it on Weibo. I will also read the review from someone who bought this product." CODE: single source is not trustworthy, consults multiple trusted sources of eWOM</p> <p>2) Delun checks several trusted sources of information to believe the message. "Sometimes they [friends] might post or share something that is not verified...After they post, I check the news website and TV." CODE: single online source is not trustworthy, consults multiple sources</p> <p>3) "[Industry expert] If there was an article about Apple Pay, I would trust it and read it. Probably, I would read more than one source. <b>I would not trust one source.</b> To make an article valid, if I saw in social media, I would probably Google it more to find out more about it" (Madelyn). CODE: seeks multiple opinions, supporting information</p>

Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>4) “I would not trust completely because I never met this person. They are not giving me any valid information that Apple pay is valid. I would be looking for something describing what Apple pay is and an article by apple attached to it. I would not trust someone saying oh download Apple Pay.” CODE: seeks proof of information validity, supporting information</p> <p>5) “This summer, it was some audio equipment that I looked up. I asked a few peers if they enjoyed the product, if they used the product. Usually, these are my family members, and then a few musicians. These are usually people that I have met in person.” ... “I think a very clever campaign, where everything is the same. If I go and look up I find the same style of writing about it. The same on Facebook, on the website, people who promote it, advertisements. Youtube is the largest place where I find a lot of the information. If I don’t find it there I usually go to Google.” (Paul) CODE: peers’ opinion, seeks expertise on a subject, familiar sources, considers multiple sources ATTRIBUTE: expertise, likability</p> <p>6) “If they had a link included. I would more likely to read a message and click on the link to head to another page to learn more about whatever it is what they are saying... I would go to an actual more credible website ” CODE: attention to link in a message and picture, official website is credible ATTRIBUTE: expertise</p>
‘Source bias (Unbiased opinion strategy)	<p>4) [Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO] “He may focus on the benefits (biased). I can’t get a weakness of the product. From the user who have used the product.” Ya CODE: seeks objective opinion (bias-free) ATTRIBUTE: bias, objectivity</p> <p>2) Source bias is the criteria that Jude considers, when judges Apple’s CEO “He may be biased, but he will not be lying about something that his company is passionate about, but he is biased” (Jude) CODE: biased opinion, CEO is biased, but truthful (knowledgeable) ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>3) [Tech blogger from UIUC] Tech blogger could like Apple product more than Samsung products or other products. Maybe a tech blogger wants a job with Apple one day. Tech blogger knows a lot about the industry, so over the years he could grow to like Apple and be biased. (Jude) CODE: biased opinion, knowledgeable, ulterior motive, subjective ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness, expertise</p> <p>4) [Tech blogger] “They are probably, opinioned very strongly to one way or the other. So I don’t know how much credibility they would have”. (Gabrie) CODE: subjective ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p>

Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.)

	<p>5) Ling tells how he will judge credibility of the source on social media “I will check updates to see if he is subjective or objective. Maybe some reporters for sports. If he claims to be a reporter and the updates from him are very objective, because he is gonna judge all the members to the same level, but if he is not very credible, he will have his favorite players, teams and will talk only about his favorite teams.”  CODE: subjective or objective, check updates  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>6) “I don’t believe him [Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO], as he is just trying to sell his product” (Ai)  CODE: biased – distrust  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>7) “They [Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network] won’t tell you something they don’t believe is true”. (Ai)  CODE: not biased – will trust  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>8) “I will trust my parents, as they will not advertise the product.” (Ai)  CODE: family trust, no ulterior motives  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>9) “I think that they [Industry experts] just want to persuade me. Use it for advertising. Every company will say that our app is the perfect one, so please use our app. I think I don’t trust them”. (Huian)  CODE: biased, not trustworthy  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>10) “Sometimes blogger will receive money to help make promotion for the app. I will trust them just a little” (Huian).  CODE: biased - distrust  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>11) “If they [tech blogger] give me advice I would say ok, but think about what their intentions were” (Susan).  CODE: ulterior motive  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p> <p>12) “it could be someone that works for Apple. They hire people to write a blog about an application. I don’t trust them as much” (Laura).  CODE: Biased, ulterior motive  ATTRIBUTE: trustworthiness</p>
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Table 7. Five evaluation strategies (quotes, codes and attributes, cont.).

**APPENDIX G**  
**RELATIONSHIP LINK (CARD DISTRIBUTION)**

Dominant Self	Distrust Completely (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Trust Completely (5)
Relational				Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Ling)	Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Ya)
				Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Mingli)	Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Jude)
				Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Madelyn)	Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Ping)
					Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Kerry)
Individual	Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Huian)		Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Gabrie)	Industry expert that <b>you follow</b> on SM (Gabrie)	Industry expert that <b>you follow</b> on SM (Delun)
			Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Ai)	Industry expert that <b>you follow</b> on SM (Ai)	Industry expert that <b>you follow</b> on SM (Lucy)
			Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Paul)	Industry expert that <b>you follow</b> on SM (Paul)	
			Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Delun)	Industry expert that <b>you follow</b> on SM (Huian)	
				Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Lucy)	
Collective				Industry expert that you follow on SM and Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM (Laura)	

Table 8. Relationship link (card distribution)

**APPENDIX H**  
**CARD DISTRIBUTION BY INFORMANTS**

**1) Ya (R)**

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Family member</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to share similar interests</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Tech blogger that you follow on social media</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> </ul>

Table 9. Card distribution (Ya)

**2) Jude (R)**

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age and share similar interests</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Family member</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> </ul>

Table 10. Card distribution (Jude)

### 3) Gabriele (I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a similar interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> </ul>

Table 11. Card distribution (Gabriele)

### 4) Ling (R)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Family member</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> </ul>

Table 12. Card distribution (Ling)

### 5) Ai (I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Family member</li> </ul>

Table 13. Card distribution (Ai)

### 6) Delun (I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Family member</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> </ul>

Table 14. Card distribution (Delun)

## 7) Huian (R)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>• Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>• Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tech blogger</li> <li>• Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>• Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>• Family member</li> </ul>

Table 15. Card distribution (Huian)

## 8) Mingli (R)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family member</li> <li>• One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>• Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>• Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>• Tech blogger</li> <li>• Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>• Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>• Apple's page on Social Media</li> </ul>

Table 16. Card distribution (Mingli)



### 9) Susan (R/I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> </ul> </li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Family member</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>

Table 17. Card distribution (Susan).

### 10) Ping (R)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> </ul>

Table 18. Card distribution (Ping)

### 11) Madelyn (R)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Family member</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> </ul>

Table 19. Card distribution (Madelyn)

### 12) Kerry (R)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> </ul>

Table 20. Card distribution (Kerry)

### 13) Lucy (I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> </ul>

Table 21. Card distribution (Lucy)

### 14) Hua (R/I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> </ul>

Table 22. Card distribution (Hua)

### 15) Laura (C)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at uiuc</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apple's page on Social Media Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> <li>Family member</li> </ul>

Table 23. Card distribution (Laura)

### 16) Paul (I)

Distrust Completely				Trust Completely
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at another University that your friend attends</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems to be of the same age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone you have never met before, who is a student at UIUC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tech blogger from UIUC</li> <li>Tech blogger</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but who seems share the same interests.</li> <li>Someone you have never met before, but with whom you have a mutual friend</li> <li>Industry expert that is followed by your friend on SM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tim Cook, Apple's CEO</li> <li>One of your Social Media friends</li> <li>Apple's page on Social Media</li> <li>Industry expert that you follow on SM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family member</li> <li>Your best friend, who is in your Social Media Network</li> </ul>

Table 24. Card distribution (Paul)